TREASURE OF KINGS

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"EVERYWHERE WAS GOLD, STACKED UPON THE FLOOR, PILED AGAINST THE WALLS." See page 208.

TREASURE OF KINGS

Being the Story of the Discovery of
the "Big Fish," or the Quest of the
Greater Treasure of the Incas of Peru.

By

MAJOR CHARLES GILSON

Author of "The Realm of the Wizard King," "The Fire Gods,"
"In the Power of the Pygmies," etc.

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Illustrations by R. CATON WOODVILLE, R.I.

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Realm of the Wizard King. A Tale of Prehistoric Monsters.
The Scarlet Hand. A Tale of a Secret Society.
Submarine U93. A Tale of the Great War at Sea.
The Fire Gods. A Tale of the African Forest.
The Mystery of Ah Jim. A Tale of the Sea.
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Held by Chinese Brigands. A Tale of China.
The Society of the Tortoise Mask. A Tale of a Secret Society.
The Captives of the Caves. A Tale of Savage Men.
The Sword of Deliverance. A Tale of the Balkan War.

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BY R. CATON WOODVILLE, R.I.

"Everywhere was gold, stacked upon the floor, piled against the walls". . . . . Frontispiece

"'Because,' he answered slowly, 'because you are a caveman, too'"

"He rolled back the boulder as though it were nothing" (missing from book)

"And bound I was, then and there, to a stout palm tree, a little distance from the margin of the forest"

"They came closer than ever, to within an arm's length of me"

"I had reached the conclusion of my journey. The Big Fish was there"

"'Hands up!' he cried. 'Hands up, you brown barbarian, or else I shoot you dead!'"

"'Lie there and rot!' he shouted. And they below heard his footsteps as he danced upon the stone"

"And so we came to the seashore, and saw the sun go down upon the wide and golden Pacific Ocean"

INSCRIBED TO

BROMLEY DAVID SMITH-DORRIEN

CHAPTER I--JOHN BANNISTER

I shall never forget the day on which I first set eyes upon John Bannister. I was then a boy--sixteen years of age, if I remember rightly--and I stood before him, tongue-tied by the questions that he asked me, wondering how he had come by the great ugly, horrid scar upon his face, awed--indeed, I think, a little frightened--by the great muscles in his forearms, naked to the elbows, his rough weather-beaten face with skin like leather, and above all else by the stature of the man.

For he was a giant--a giant such as I had dreamed of when a child. As some such figure had I pictured Giant Despair, when my mother had read to me from *Pilgrim's Progress*: "And Giant Despair was in one of his fits again." I had pictured Strength and Madness let loose amid a thunderstorm of wrath. And when I first looked upon him who was to be my champion and my comrade. I forgot his soft, kindly words and pleasing smile, and could only think how terrible he must be in anger.

There is a strip of beach upon the Sussex coast, so many miles from nowhere, where the sand-snipe gather and seldom a human being may be seen. There, as a lad, I would love to roam, with no certain object in view, but just to find what I could, to observe what chanced to come my way, and, when wearied of wandering, to sit upon the shingle over and above those plains of wet, grey sand and think of all manner of things as my boyish fancy pleased.

I was seated thus one April morning, far from home, and wondering how my tired legs would carry me back to dinner, when my attention was attracted to two strange birds, of a kind that I could not remember to have seen before. The sea was calm as glass, the sun hot as August. They were large birds, and were engaged--so far as I could see at a distance of more than a hundred yards--in

dragging from the shallow water what might have been the carcass of a fish.

I watched them, greatly interested, forgetful even of my appetite, possibly for five minutes; and then there came a heavy step upon the shingle at my back.

I turned quickly, to behold the figure of John Bannister. Like some great beast of prey, he had broken his way quite noiselessly through a thick brake of that shrub which, I think, is called sea-buckthorn--though I never knew one tree from another. And he stood regarding me, with his hands upon his hips.

I got to my feet, thinking that such a man might be up to no good in so lonesome a place, and I might find it advisable to take to my heels. But, quite suddenly, he laughed; and at the sound of his laughter I knew at once that I, for sure, had nothing to fear. Since that memorable day I have learned in the world many true and singular things, but none truer than that you may know always an honest man by his laughter and the shake of his hand.

"I startled you," he said.

"I wondered who it was," I faltered sheepishly.

"And you are still none the wiser," he answered.

And at that, he seated himself by my side.

He told me that the strange birds were hooded crows. He told me also how they bullied the rooks, robbed the gulls; how they were cleverer and more evil than any other bird, foes of all and feared by all--thieves and murderers. He talked like a book; he had the science of the matter at his finger-tips, and he could, at the same time, paint pictures, as it were, with words. With him the hooded crow was in a single sentence *corvus cornix*, and the "highwayman of the air."

And as he talked to me, I wondered the more concerning him, and thought the less of the hooded crows. Who was he, whence had he come, and what was he doing there in such a lonely place, in his shirt sleeves, in the warm April sunshine? These were questions that he himself was to answer. I cannot say why he took me straightway into his confidence, and afterwards into the very chamber of his heart--but he did; else I would now have naught to write about.

Let me confess that I have taken the whole tenour of my life from this man's greatness. I have tried my best, all my long years, to bear in mind his strength, his wisdom, and his courage, that I might walk humbly in the shadow of a glorious example. But, more than all besides, I know that I owe to him the restless spirit of adventure, the love of action, the joy of wandering, that has led me so often to strange and distant places where I have found myself in even stranger company.

I cannot tell you of all he said to me upon the morning of our meeting. He spoke of many things, of the world he had seen, the dangers he had faced, the people he had known. As I had no longer feared him after his first word and his open, kindly smile, so after five minutes of his talking did I feel that I had known him all my life. For his words were magic. Wondrous pictures framed themselves

before my eyes upon the calm surface of that English sea--pictures of wild men, of treeless deserts, of savage forests and inhospitable hills; and I longed then to follow in the footsteps of this heroic man, whose hairy arms were those of Vulcan and whose voice was soft as that of the mother whom I loved.

I forgot my dinner. I hungered only for adventure. I sat upon the shingle, wondering what lay beyond the vague horizon where grey sea and sky were blended, where I could just discern the smoke of a solitary and distant steamer, the only sign of life or movement upon that desert sea--for we in the West of Sussex lay well away from the track of the Channel shipping.

On a sudden, I asked him the time; and with a glance at the sun he told me it was two. At that, I jumped to my feet.

"But I am late!" I cried.

"Not for the first time," said he. "I can remember my own boyhood."

"My dinner was at one."

"Then you dine with me; for I eat when I have time and appetite, sleep when I will, and live as Nature meant me to."

He led me back from the beach across some sand-hills to a place where the gorse was like a wave of gold. And there was a wooden hut--or, rather, shed, for it was walled upon three sides only. And within were all sorts of things: a sleeping-bag made of the skins of some small animal with fur soft as a mole's, which he said had come from the south of Africa; an iron cooking-pot, an evil-looking affair which he had brought with him from the Amazon; skins painted by North American savages; mocassins; a Malay sarong, a kind of towel worn around the waist; and more curiosities and rude, primitive utensils than I could well describe within the space of a page of the smallest print.

And yet, I dined like a prince: a soup of fish, plover roasted upon a spit, and in place of bread, flour and water fried in a pan after the custom of the Afghans. It may have been the novelty of it all, or the fact that by then I was well-nigh famished, but I never ate more heartily, and I have never forgotten that meal, though I have had many such since then.

In answer to my questions, he told me more concerning himself. Though he had lived a life of adventure, exploring wild countries, sleeping beneath the stars, in constant peril of his life from savage beasts and scarce less savage men, I could not of myself comprehend why he should in peaceful England bury himself miles from the abodes of his fellow human beings. For I write--you must remember--of many years ago, of the mid-Victorian time, as it is called--and good days they were, as we know full well who have lived to see these unsettled, troublous days. To-day, from the spot where John Bannister and I first met, you may catch a glimpse to the west along the coast of the red roofs of bungalows, where week-end visitors may come from London to set up bathing-huts upon the beach,

whilst from the east, perhaps, a pair of lovers may wander from across the golf course at Littlehampton in search of desirable seclusion. For that stretch of coast is desolate still; but in those days it was a kind of No Man's Land, with no sign of life but the gulls and the sand-snipe, the smoke from John Bannister's camp-fire, and the hooded crows.

Well, the truth was, he who feared neither beast of prey nor painted cannibal was afraid of civilised men. He went once a week to the little inland village a few miles distant to purchase groceries and stores. There--as I found out afterwards--they thought him a madman, though he was always courteous in his manner and paid without question for what he bought. He had few words for any man, and none ever for a woman. Later, when my mother came to learn of my new-found friend who lived alone among the sand-hills, she was anxious to see him, more for my own welfare than from curiosity; but he told me flatly that he had never known any civilised woman save his own mother, who had died when he was young, and he would rather face a wounded lion than pretend to talk to one.

"For it comes to this," said he; "I have gone back, as it were, upon the centuries; I have learned to live as men lived in ancient times. Though I have read much and thought more, and have some claim, I suppose, to be called a scholar, in many ways I am no better than a cave-man. I have forgotten all the niceties of culture. I have neither small-talk nor table manners. So I prefer to live as I do, in my own way; and I offer no welcome to visitors. The farmer who owns this land is glad enough of the little I pay him in the way of rent; but, beyond that and my weekly shopping, I seek no intercourse with strangers. I am content to be alone."

I asked if he were not often lonely, and he laughed.

"Even here," said he, "in Sussex, Nature is a living force. The sea changes almost hour by hour. Birds come and visit me. Even the rabbits in the brake have already learned to know me. They all seem to know--these little, wild things--that I am one of them, and soon cease to fear me. They are my companions and my friends, and I have also books and memory. And I have health and air, the smell of the salt sea and the seaweed, and the sunrise to awaken me before your street-bred friends are stirring. The wind, the rain, and the sun--I welcome each as it comes. Did I want other comrades, I should go and seek them; but I prefer to live like this."

"And yet you talked willingly to me?" I asked.

"Because," he answered slowly--and his words came to me as a surprise--"because you are a cave-man, too."

"I!" I exclaimed.

"Every boy," said he, "every healthy, happy boy. It was the savage in you--though you may not realise it--that brought you out here alone, that took you

[image]

"'BECAUSE,' HE ANSWERED SLOWLY, 'BECAUSE YOU ARE A CAVE-MAN, TOO.'"

right away from red bricks and shops and dinner."

I cannot say whether I have conveyed to the reader in the space of this short chapter a true conception of the character of John Bannister, as he was when I knew him first. Of his personal appearance I have yet to write; and if it be a simple matter to describe that which is outwardly apparent, it is by no means easy either to fathom or to portray a man's soul and mind.

Do not imagine that I myself knew aught of him until after we had sojourned together for months, faced the same dangers, stood side by side throughout the great adventure of which I have to tell. I knew from the first that he was wise and generous and kind: I could see with my eyes that he was strong, and his talk charmed the imagination of a dreamy, active boy. In spite of all he knew, of the experiences he had had in all parts of the world, he was one of the simplest men that ever lived. And there was something in him of the poet. I do not mean that he ever tried to set down his thoughts in verse, but that he lived in love with all things beautiful. I have seen him stand stock-still like one transfigured, with eyes illumined, gazing in wonderment upon a purple sunset upon the snow-capped crestline of the distant Andes--and that at a moment when his own life, as well as mine, was not worth a full day's purchase.

Judge all men by their deeds and not their words. Hear this history to the end, and see what like of man was he whose charm and peril led me forth from green and sleepy Sussex to adventure in the darkness of those tropic forests that shut out the source of the great River of Mystery, where there are poison, black ignorance, and fell disease, and a man may no more count the dangers that encompass him than the myriads of stinging insects that drone about his ears.

And one thing more: my own life has not been lived without event. It has been my fate to tell a score of times of the enterprise of others; but of all men of action I have ever known, read or written of, I rank John Bannister as first. Perhaps that may be because I can now seat myself of a winter's evening before my study fire and see him in my fancy as he was in all his strength and manhood, pass through again the dangers and the hardships, and live once more the glorious days that it was my privilege to pass with him, and remember that, had it not been for him, I might have lived all my life in Sussex and seen nothing of the world. But how can I set down the debt I owe him? For I owe him life itself.

CHAPTER II--THE COMING OF AMOS

After that morning, throughout the summer months when I was at school, there was seldom a Saturday or a Wednesday afternoon when I was not to be seen hastening eastward along the beach to see John Bannister and to listen to his talk.

During those days I learned much of him, of his travels and adventures; but there were certain matters upon which he would never speak in any detail. He would never tell me, for instance, the full story of how he had come by the great scar upon his face--a disfigurement so pronounced as to be at once pathetic and repulsive, which had aroused my boyish curiosity from the first. Had it not been for that scar, Bannister would have been a handsome man, as indeed he was when the left side of his face was to be seen in profile. He had deep-set steel-grey eyes that looked clean through you, and the forehead of a thinker; his hair, in those bygone days, was black, no more than touched with white upon the temples and about the ears, and his moustache the longest I have ever seen. Though there was never a man, I should suppose, who had less of vanity in his composition, I think he grew it thus to hide in part the record of the terrible wound that had extended from his right ear to the corner of his mouth--a scar that was always rough and white, though his face was burnt by the sun to the colour of tan.

"I came by that," he once said to me in answer to my question, "in what might be called an honest cause. A thousand miles from nowhere, where there is neither Law nor Right nor Wrong nor Justice, one--who may or may not have learned the Lord's Prayer at his mother's knee--would have put to death some score of helpless human creatures, slaughtered them like sheep."

"Why?" I asked.

"Why," said he, "there are but few motives that sway the evil that lies in all men, and of these greed of gold is first. And this man of whom I speak was a great force of evil, and is so still, for I never doubt that he is yet alive. For gold he would have murdered those who had never wronged him, who had indeed shown him

nothing but kindness and hospitality. Fate decreed that this man's path and mine should cross; and because I stood between him and an ill-gotten fortune, I was struck a coward's blow. You would never guess the weapon, Dick, that gave me my beauty mark for life?"

He paused as if waiting for an answer, though I had none to give.

"Well, then," he continued, "it was a sceptre--the golden sceptre of a bygone dynasty of monarchs, ended four hundred years ago--kings of no naked savages, but emperors, rulers over an ancient civilisation that has crumbled to the dust, of a people who were cultured in their own way, industrious and great. It is something, we may imagine, to carry through life the scar that was given by the symbol of such authority and power."

"And where was this?" I asked.

"Where the mountains overtop the clouds," he answered, "where one may see the last of the sunset beyond the valleys of Peru, and the dawn rises from the dark forests of the Upper Amazon, in which, Dick, there are secrets that no man yet has ever lived to learn."

"It was the sceptre of the *Incas*!" I exclaimed; for I had read as a holiday task *The Conquest of Peru*.

"The very same that was hidden from Pizarro," he made answer, "together with all the gold of Huaraz and Cuzco."

"And who was the man who struck you?" I demanded.

"When I tell you that his name is Amos Baverstock," said Bannister, "that he hails from the same west-country town as I do--and that is Tiverton in Devon--and that that man to this day counts himself as my greatest enemy, I tell you more than I should."

And though I tried my utmost, I could get from him nothing more. A reticent man by nature, he was yet from the beginning prodigal of speech with me. With the exception of this great Peruvian adventure--which, I could tell from his demeanour, he ranked as the one outstanding episode in all his life--he would answer all my questions. I thought this strange; and there was an even stranger thing about him--and I was soon to learn that the two were linked together. Though he had to some extent confided in myself, he forbade me to speak of him to my schoolfellows. He told me he was well content to have found a friend in a boy after his own heart, much the same sort of lad as the John Bannister who had bathed in the Exe, and, barefooted, raced other boys upon the river bank; but, were the knowledge of his presence upon that lonely shore to become the common property of a clamouring, crowded school, his seclusion would be lost, his peace of mind disturbed, his haven of rest and solitude converted into a kind of monkey-house--for that is what he called it.

I gave my word, and kept it; and yet, I could not but think of things. And it

occurred to me that John Bannister lived as he did for other reasons than solely to enjoy the fruits of solitude. Not that he himself had ever told me anything that was not the truth: he had, indeed, sojourned for so many years in the wild places of the world that he had forgotten much concerning the ways of civilisation and could be shy--as he was before my mother--like an overgrown yokel who stands, cap in hand, first on one foot and then upon the other. He wanted more than solitude, he wanted secrecy. For more reasons than one I should have guessed it; but I was but a boy, and looked not for motives or for causes. I was content to take the man as he was: a hero in my eyes, who had risked his life a thousand times, who had done great deeds and seen strange sights and wondrous places that I had only dreamed of.

And now I come, at last, to the beginning of my story: a blazing morning in the August sun, when our friendship was four months old, when the wheels of chance began to move, and those forces were set in motion that whirled me away, when still a schoolboy, from sunny, sleepy Sussex, to be a wayfarer with grim Death himself in dark, tropic lowlands, or amid the very clouds.

It being holiday-time, and I having no thought in my head than what pertained to my hero, I set forth earlier than usual, and took the straight cut across the fields, instead of following the shore. This led me to a group of sand-hills, not half a mile from where Bannister had pitched his camp; and amid these I stumbled upon three men, seated, heads together, in the shadow of a gorse bush.

I cannot for the life of me explain why I did it--never before or since have I played the eavesdropper of my own free choice--but the moment I set eyes upon a hunchback, with a clean, wrinkled face and two small eyes as black as boot-buttons, down I dropped on all fours, like a man shot, and crept silently and swiftly to the cover of a clump of reed-like grass.

I think the sight of the man frightened me. He had the cruellest face I had ever seen; and there was cunning in it, too. Also, there was a suggestion of merriness, of latent mirth, about him--patent in the shining, bead-like eyes--that caused me instantly to shudder. Have you ever considered the eyes of a half-grown pig, as something apart from the glistening, inquisitive, joyful, and highly entertaining quadruped that a young pig happens invariably to be? They are wicked and gleeful, defiant and pitiless, those little, twinkling eyes. They are more fearful than those of a snake, because they are more alive and equally soulless. Well, then, such eyes had this man: eyes at once merciless and mischievous. And so it was, I must suppose, that I hid myself amid the grass.

And then one of those who were with him used these very words; and when I heard them, it was as if I was deprived of the power to breathe.

"I wish I were a hundred miles from here, I can tell you that. He's not likely to forget that it was you, Amos Baverstock, that trapped him and left him for dead,

and that it was I who struck the blow."

I lay in the long grass, close as a hare, my heart pumping within me like an engine. I had heard and seen enough already to know that my friend was in danger. I had a sense of some calamity impending, but no time just then to guess at the meaning of it all; for I must listen to the quiet, cold voice of Amos Baverstock--the hunchback with the pig eyes and a long, thin nose like a weasel.

"You were right enough in London," said he, "when I told you I had tracked him down, as I swore to you both I should."

"Maybe," said the other, "I forgot, for the moment, what he was. I would sooner face a tiger."

He was a rough-looking man, with a red, untidy beard, and there was something about him of the sailor.

"Tut, man," said Amos; "you make a mountain of a molehill! I do not propose to set about this matter like a fool. He's lying yonder like an old dog-fox in his earth, and we'll send a terrier in to fetch him out."

"Me!" cried the red-bearded man, horror-stricken at the thought.

But, before Amos Baverstock could answer, the third man spoke for the first time; and my attention being thereby attracted towards him, I was at once astonished at everything about his individuality: his voice, his personal appearance, the words he used, his very attitude of carelessness and ease.

"*Cave tibi cane muto.*"

That is what he drawled, and though I was then a schoolboy who had struggled through the dull prose of Cæsar to the loftier realms of Virgil, I must confess that fear had so deprived me of my wits that I understood no word, except the first.

The speaker lay flat upon his back, with his hands folded behind his head, and his face exposed to the sun--like a tripper who would go back to London nicely tanned. I observed that he had taken off his coat and rolled it into a pillow, and that the shirt he wore was of the softest, flimsiest silk.

He was dressed like a fop in the height of the fashion of that day, wearing a white tie, with a great gold pin in it, a well-curled moustache and those short side-whiskers which were then the vogue. He had light-blue eyes and fair, curly hair, and had it not been for the side-whiskers, would have looked much younger than he was. Everything about him suggested that he was--or should have been--a gentleman of means and leisure.

"*Cave tibi cane muto*," he repeated, more slowly than before. And this time I had the sense to understand it: "Beware of the silent dog."

"Just so," said Amos. "We will tempt the dog with a bone. Trust to me, you dolt," he cried, turning sharp upon the man with the red beard, who was sitting with a scowl upon his face and his legs crossed like a Hindoo. "Ask yourself, have

I ever yet sent you on a wild-goose chase? Am I one to take unnecessary risks?"

"Then, shoot him, take what we want, and have done with it," growled the other.

"Friend Joshua," said Amos, "we are some eight thousand miles from Chimborazo, and probably not two miles from a police-station. We want no questions asked, no hue and cry. That would ruin everything."

"There's something in that," admitted the red-bearded man, whose name was evidently Joshua.

Amos chuckled.

"This is no baby's game," said he. "Bannister fears neither man, wild beast nor devil. No more am I afraid of him. I have tricked him once, and I can trick him again. Were I to get within arm's length of him, it is true, as like as not he would wring my precious neck; and the same applies to you, friend Joshua; for he will not have forgotten that it was you who struck him down at the end of the passage that leads from Cahazaxa's Tomb. But Mr. Forsyth here, he has never set eyes on in all his life."

"In other words," cut in the young man with the side-whiskers, still stretched at full length upon the ground--"in other words, I myself am the bone to be presented to the silent, dangerous dog. A pleasant prospect--but I acquiesce. Having gone into this business, I am prepared to take what comes."

Though he had spoken with a shade more animation than before, he had neither moved an inch nor troubled even to open his eyes. A calm customer, in very truth, was Mr. Gilbert Forsyth, as I was afterwards to learn, something to my cost--a man with more manners than morals, who was never afraid and never surprised, and who smelt of the vile pomade with which he plastered his moustache.

"Sir," said Baverstock, "you are the very man for me. I promise you that, if we pull this business through, we shall wade knee-deep in gold."

"I want gold to spend and not to paddle in," said Forsyth. "Give orders, Mr. Wisdom; I am here solely to obey."

Amos produced a long and very black cigar, bit the end off and began to chew, making his face all wrinkles. I thought that he would light it, but he did no such thing. He would look at it with one eye half closed, use it much as a musical director wields his baton to punctuate his words, and then chew again, until the brown juice was streaming from the corners of his mouth.

"Go to John Bannister this morning," said he. "Go to him now, if you like. He doesn't know you from Adam. Pretend you're just an idle, inquisitive holiday-maker who has dropped across him by chance; get into conversation with him, ask him foolish questions; and then, without advertisement, just--drop that across his head."

As he said this, he threw across to Mr. Forsyth some kind of weighted implement, such as a house-breaker might have in his possession. It was about the size and shape of a belaying-pin, and attached to the thin end was a leather strap to secure it to the wrist.

"Sounds simple enough," drawled Forsyth. "However, for the sake of argument, suppose I fail. I understand from what you both tell me, he has the strength of two ordinary men."

"Six," growled the red-bearded fellow, who seemed to me to be a discontented rascal.

"Strike hard and without warning," said Amos. "In case of mishap, Trust and I will be at hand to help you."

I thought, at the time, that Trust was another man--a fourth party in this vile conspiracy; for I did not then know that the name of the red-bearded man--as great a rogue as Amos himself, if not a tenth as clever--was Joshua Trust, who had served before the mast in the Royal Navy, to be tried by court-martial for a felony and afterwards discharged.

Mr. Forsyth, in the meantime, picked up the bludgeon and toyed with it in his hand.

"A useful tool," he observed. "Convenient to carry, and--I should say--effective to use. To be candid, I'm a little afraid of it. Though I have not the pleasure of knowing Mr. Bannister, I should be sorry--for my own sake as well as his--to deprive him of his life."

"You need not be afraid of that," laughed Amos. "Had his skull been thinner than a bullock's, it would have been broken years ago. We want him senseless, when we can bind him hand and foot, and help ourselves to the very thing we want. He has got it somewhere, sure enough; and had I to search the world for it, I would find it in the end."

And then he clapped his hands and rubbed them together; and I have never seen in all my life an expression of such malignant glee.

"Once it is ours," he cried, "across the Western Ocean! Nothing stands between us three and fortune. Gold!" he almost shrieked, "I tell you, it is there knee-deep in a cavern as large as a cathedral: golden ornaments and vessels, bars and rings and bracelets. You shall have your fair share, Mr. Forsyth; for all's square between us, and, I confess, we could not very well move in this business without you. Joshua here will tell you, though I may be an ill man to cross in more ways than one, I never yet went back upon my friends. You've come into this affair to help us, and I'll not forget it."

"Dear me, no!" drawled Forsyth. "I join you for my own ultimate gain. I recognise that I am blessed with as little conscience as yourselves, and see profit in the matter. I know nothing of this fellow Bannister, and care still less. Besides, I

have, I suppose, a natural taste for such an adventure as you propose. I am heartily tired of this dreary country, with its railways, gas-pipes and antimacassars. I would, in a word, stake all I have upon an only venture, to die soon or rich--I care little which it be."

And thereupon he yawned, placing the tips of his fingers before his mouth in a manner exceedingly affected.

They talked then for a while of other things; and all the time I was seeking an opportunity to escape, to hasten to my friend to warn him of his danger; and yet, though I was well screened from view of Amos Baverstock and his companions, it was some time before I could find the courage to bestir myself. I feared that they might hear me; and the very sight of Amos had instilled within me a sense of dread which returns to me even to this day whenever I think of the man.

I lay in the long grass like a wounded bird: it was as if I had not the power to move. My thoughts were running riot--Bannister to be shamefully assaulted, something stolen, and I kept repeating to myself the magic phrase, "Gold knee-deep in a cavern large as a cathedral."

There was something about all this of the kind of adventures I had often imagined; I had thought that I would revel in the prospect of such dangerous escapades; and here was I, scared out of my wits, too terrified to move, my heart beating violently, as if I were out of breath from running.

Indeed, it was only the thought that Amos Baverstock or one of the others would get up to go, and then discover me, that made me shift from where I had been hiding; and no sooner was I out of earshot than I set off running as if pursued by fifty fiends. I never ran so fast before or since. Over the sand-hills, stumbling amidst the shingle, breaking my way through gorse and hedgerow, I came at last to John Bannister's cabin, lying in a hollow by the sea.

"Mr. Bannister!" I cried. "Mr. Bannister! Something dreadful is about to happen!"

I was, I suppose, half blinded by my running; or I had not the sense to look about me. I stood before the opening of the cabin, wringing my hands and crying out like a fool:

"Mr. Bannister! Mr. Bannister! Come quickly!"

I had for answer neither the sight of his great strength nor the familiar sound of his voice, but just the wash of the sea at high tide beyond the ridge where the buckthorn grew, a great rhythmical, breathing sound, as if a giant were slumbering.

I was more afraid than ever when I realised that he was not there, and it might take time to find him; for, befogged as my wits were, I knew well enough that the occasion was one that would admit of no delay.

I ran straight to the beach, and looked to the eastward and westward. For a

moment I had hoped to find him, for he would sometimes bathe in the sea at that hour of the day; but a glance or so was enough to tell me I should not find him there.

I wandered for a while somewhat aimlessly amongst the shrubberies that crowned the margin of the sand-hills and the shingle, and then returned to the cabin. As things happened, I must have done so in the nick of time; for, when I had searched in odd corners, as if looking for a hidden thimble, instead of a man of six-foot-four, I went to the threshold, and looking out beyond the gorse, beheld the tall figure of Mr. Gilbert Forsyth, strolling towards me, swinging in his hand his silver-mounted Malacca cane.

I did not know whether or not he had seen me. It was sufficient for the moment that I had no way of escape. The cabin--as I have said--had been built in a hollow, and to cross the ridge that encompassed it would bring me into full view of Mr. Forsyth.

On the other hand, I could think of nowhere to hide. I stood for a moment irresolute, with clenched fists, cudgelling my brains and wishing that I was anywhere else upon the wide face of the earth. Then I heard a footstep on the shingle without, and as I drew back into the shade of the hut, I saw the man's shadow cast upon the threshold.

I looked about me in a wild and silly way, and then without a thought dived under the great fur sleeping-bag that lay ruffled against the wall.

Forsyth entered. I could not see him, but I could hear him moving to and fro, and once he even trod upon my foot. Then I heard his voice, raised in a kind of drawling sing-song, as if he called to someone at a distance.

"Come on," he sang. "The way's clear. The dog's out of his kennel."

A full minute may have elapsed. On such occasions, time counts for next to nothing. But, presently, I was aware that, besides myself, there were three persons in that small place, and one of them was Amos Baverstock.

"Here's our chance," said he. "Joshua, keep watch from without. He may not be far away, and it would be a rough-and-tumble business if he caught us in the act. And now, sir, help me to find the map. The thing must be somewhere in this hut, unless he carries it always on his person."

And at those words was I made to realise that, as sure as I had been christened Richard Treadgold in the little church at Middleton, I had done a foolish thing and was like to be made to pay for it.

For Amos Baverstock was come to search for a certain map, the significance of which I then, of course, knew nothing. Whether or not he would find this map was a question of itself; but there was no sort of a question within the bounds of probability that he could look for long and fail to discover *me*. And then, in truth, the fat would be in the fire.

CHAPTER III--THE MAP

I expected every moment to be caught, to be jerked forth from my hiding-place like a landed fish. In the course of their searching they must sooner or later move the sleeping-bag, and I would be exposed.

It occurs to me that fear must be one of the strangest of emotions; for I can honestly say that, now that I was in this hopeless and perilous predicament, I was no longer afraid. Certain that I must fall into the hands of Amos Baverstock, equally uncertain of what then would be my lot, I was resigned to my fate; I was long past apprehension. I still thought of Bannister, and wondered concerning the map for which Amos and Forsyth were looking, but for myself I now cared not a snap of the fingers what became of me; and this attitude of mind I preserved throughout the next eventful moments, else I had never acted as I did.

For Amos never found me on his own account. No doubt he would have done so in a very little time, had not Forsyth, almost at once, struck upon the very map for which the two were searching.

"What's this!" exclaimed Forsyth. "It seems the thing we want."

"Where?" cried Amos, who, I judged, snatched it from the other's hand.

"That's it!" he almost shouted. "The parchment map copied from that made ages ago by Villac Umu, the High Priest of the Incas of Peru. Bannister has translated it, and marked the route in red ink. It's all plain as daylight."

I could tell by the sound of his voice that he was wildly excited. He spread out the map upon the little table in the centre of the cabin, and, feeling secure since Joshua Trust was keeping watch, spoke breathlessly to Forsyth, relating the matter in such detail that then and there I was made a party to the whole vile conspiracy--or as much of it as there was any need for me to know.

"When the ancient Peruvians fled before the advance of the Pizarros," he explained, "they carried their treasures across the mountains. These they hid in two places: one, which is called the Little Fish, consists of all manner of earthenware utensils; the other--the Big Fish--is composed of golden ornaments and ingots. I have heard it said by some that the Little Fish is in Bolivia; by others, as

far north as the Amazonas Territory--the truth being that no man living knows. It was John Bannister himself who discovered the secret of the Greater Treasure, or the Big Fish, as the natives call it. He lived for years among the wild savages who inhabit the forests about the eastern foothills of the Andes; and there, I believe, he came across some priestly descendants of those who had served the Incas. It was high up among the Conomamas, to the south of the great Region of the Woods, that I first fell in with Bannister. I was there prospecting for gold, but I had never dreamed of such a gold-mine as the Greater Treasure of the Incas. Bannister never told me that he had learned the secret from the priests, but I made so free as to inspect the map, when I believed him to be sleeping."

"But is this safe?" asked Forsyth. "Supposing Bannister returns?"

"There is nothing to fear," said Amos. "Time's our own. Joshua is on watch upon the sand-hills, and can see him coming half a mile away. We are as safe here as anywhere."

"Well, then, go on with your story," said the other. "You saw the map yourself?"

"No more than glanced at the thing before he had me by the throat and well-nigh strangled me," cried Amos. "After that we parted company, though I followed his track, and three times tried to kill him."

I heard Mr. Forsyth laugh in his silly, affected way.

"You do not mince your words," said he. "And I think I like you for it all the better. So you tried to murder him, and failed?"

"I did not say 'murder,'" grumbled Amos. "You can do no worse than kill in the great Region of the Woods; and whether you slay a jaguar, a monkey or man, it is much the same in the end. But to kill a man like John Bannister is no such easy matter. He has the ear of a panther and the eye of a bird, and he strikes like the coral snake--silent and deadly--and for those self-same reasons, the story I am telling you must now turn something against myself. For I began the business by hunting John Bannister in the Wilderness; but, before the game was a week old, it was he that was hunting me, and hunting me, too, day and night, from the Putumayo to Bolivia, from the Amazon to the sea.

"I sought safety, at last, in the port of Lima, where I was sheltered by some pretence of Law and Justice; and there I joined forces with friend Joshua and three other kindred spirits who now lie unburied, their bones picked by the vultures.

"Well, then," Amos went on, "we five put our heads together and talked the question out. It was plain to us that, since Bannister was such a tough nut to crack, it were safer and simpler to go straight to the fountain head, as the saying goes, and see what could be done with the priests. I guessed from what Bannister had told me, that the Peruvians were a weak-kneed, cowardly lot, and thought it would not be difficult to frighten them into telling us all they knew. But we

had to search the woods for months before we found them, living in the midst of black ignorance and superstition; and by then--would you believe it!--Bannister had got wind of our intentions, and had come back upon his own trail, crossing the mountains and descending into the Region of the Woods.

"He turned up in time to ruin all our plans. His very presence gave the priests the courage they had lacked. There was a stiff fight, and we, having the worst of it, were obliged to beat a quick retreat to the foothills, though we carried with us a hostage. So far as this man was concerned, I took a leaf from the book of the Spaniards. I knew that Pizarro had not gained all his knowledge by fair words and promises. I tortured the wretch, until he shrieked for mercy and promised that he would guide us to Cahazaxa's Tomb, upon the very crestline of the Andes, where he swore to us the Greater Treasure was hid. Thither we went, to find that the rascal had lied to us. A few golden ornaments there were, in a vault cut in the living rock, at the end of a narrow passage, and amongst these was the ancient sceptre of the Incas, but the lot were not worth the price of our journey. Moreover, John Bannister himself had had the audacity to follow us. Night by night, he hovered about our bivouac, hoping to deprive us of our hostage. So I set my mind to work to finish him; and as fortune had it, the old Tomb was as good as a rat-trap. For there was a great boulder at the mouth of the passage, which might be rolled down-hill to block the entrance; and even then it was as much as Joshua and I could do. We fooled John Bannister to enter the Tomb by making a show of moving camp and leaving the Peruvian behind. However, when we thought we had caged him, we found to our great dismay that we had under-estimated the man's colossal strength; for he rolled back the boulder as though it were nothing, and came down upon us like a raging lion."

[Illustration: "HE ROLLED BACK THE BOULDER AS IF IT WERE NOTHING (missing from book)]

Amos paused a moment in his narrative. Listening eagerly for what was yet to come, I heard distinctly the disgusting noise of the chewing of one of his long, black cigars.

"We were unprepared for that," he continued. "Indeed, thinking we had got him safely caught, to starve to death or shoot himself, we were standing before the entrance to the passage without our arms; and before we could master him, our party of five had been reduced to two. It was Joshua who ended the affair. We had looted the Tomb of the little treasure that was there; and Joshua snatched up the golden sceptre of the Incas and struck down John Bannister, whom that night we left for dead."

"And what of the map?" asked Forsyth.

"We searched him, but never found it. He may have left it with the priests, or hidden it somewhere in the forest. Two years later, I again journeyed to the Region of the Woods, and found out from the priests that Bannister had taken it away with him, after he had returned to the Wilderness from Cahazaxa's Tomb."

Amos had calmed down by degrees whilst he related the whole story to Mr. Forsyth; but now, quite suddenly, he became as frantically excited as before.

"For two years I have hunted for the man," he cried; "and I found him here by chance. I want nothing but the map, to know where the Greater Treasure has lain hidden for more than four centuries, and to learn how to get there. See here!" he shouted; "the place is far to the north, near the valley of the Yapura River. The treasure of the Incas was carried four hundred miles from Cuzco!"

"What more could we want?" laughed Forsyth.

"Why, nothing else," said Amos. "This map's worth more to us than the keys to the vaults of the Bank of England."

I heard a sound like the rustle of paper or parchment, from which I judged that Amos flourished the map in his hand. And then it was that I did a thing so bold that I have never ceased to be amazed at my own audacity.

I had passed from sheer fright to cold deliberation. I cared not two pins for my own safety; and though I was still in dread of Amos, I thought not once of him, but of John Bannister, whose very shadow I almost worshipped. Besides, it must be understood, I was already caught like a fly in the web of these adventures. I had listened, as to a story, to all that Amos had said, and had tried to figure in my mind's eye the Greater Treasure, all glittering in the dust, Cahazaxa's Tomb and the dark Region of the Woods. I knew, from what I had heard, that if all this wealth belonged to any Christian man, that man was John Bannister himself and never Amos Baverstock. Why Bannister was content to live as he did, when he could be master of such riches, was a circumstance I could not then explain, but which I was wise enough to see was no concern of mine. Upon one thing was I well determined, with a kind of blind pig-headedness that might have led to my own undoing--and that was that Amos should never take away with him the map.

"Gold!" he cried. "Gold! We'll wade knee-deep in it!"

And at that, I sprang from under the sleeping-bag and hurled myself straight at him whom I so truly feared.

Both he and Mr. Forsyth were too surprised to do little else but gape, which gave me the chance I wanted, to snatch the parchment from his hand.

I do not think I could have been much quicker; but he was not to be taken unawares. The parchment was old, and must have been half torn already, for, when he pulled one way and I the other, the thing came in half. And then, even before Baverstock had time to drop an oath, I was past the opening of the cabin and racing like a madman through the gorse.

CHAPTER IV--KIDNAPPED

While I went over the sand-hills like a hare, I looked back once and saw Amos running, his face all screwed up in fury, and his black eyes as if they were on fire. At the door of the cabin stood Mr. Forsyth, shaking his Malacca cane at me, but never troubling himself to move so much as an inch.

I knew from the first that I had the legs of both of them, that Amos could never catch me though I carried a pound weight on either foot. And I believe, like a fool, I laughed, thinking myself secure; and when I pulled through a hedgerow that cut off the sand-drift from the open fields, I found myself face to face with Joshua.

For my own excuse, it may be urged that I had had much to think of in the last few minutes; and if I had remembered my friendship with Bannister, I had at least forgotten the very existence of Joshua Trust. But there he was, as plain as a pike-staff, about thirty yards to the front of me.

I pulled up and stared at him; and to my surprise he made no movement, until I heard the voice of Amos from behind me.

"Catch the young fiend! Shoot, Joshua, before he gets away!"

And at that I jumped to the right, straight into a rabbit-hole, and pitched on to my head.

I lay where I was for a few seconds without moving, for I was a trifle shaken by the fall. I could still hear Amos, cursing and swearing horribly, and Joshua, beating along the hedge with his stick. For all that, neither could I see them nor could they see me; for I was flat upon my face in a bunch of thistles, which was near as great a torment as a swarm of bees.

I knew from the first that sooner or later I would have to run for it; and the only thing that held me back from bolting then and there was the certain knowledge that Joshua Trust would shoot. I write with natural reluctance whatsoever stands something to the credit of myself; but, even at the moment, I thought more of the parchment than of my own skin. For I still held the crumpled fragment of the map in my right hand, gripping it tightly as if it were a running-cork.

I heard Joshua's voice quite near to me; and knowing that he must find me if I remained where I was, I resolved to take my chance. But first, in case of possible misfortune, I stuffed my portion of the parchment map to the full length of an arm down the very rabbit-hole that had tripped me up. And as I did so, a thought flashed through my mind: that it was, indeed, a strange circumstance that half the secret of the Greater Treasure of the Incas of old Peru, who four hundred years ago had foiled the greedy Spaniards, should lie hidden in a rabbit-scrape in Sussex.

And then I sprang to my feet and trusted to Providence to help me. Joshua was in front of me and threw out his arms to catch me. But I dived beneath them, swerved away from him, and ran for my very life.

I heard Amos shouting like a madman. Out of the corner of an eye, I saw Joshua Trust fumbling in the region of his belt for the pistol I knew he carried.

It was neck or nothing then. I had the sense not to run straight, but to dodge here and there like a snipe; and as like as not I owed my life to that. For I found out afterwards that Trust was a dead shot, who seldom missed his mark.

As I fled, the sharp crack of his pistol broke upon the silence, scaring the sea birds from the beach. The bullet sang past my head and clipped the lobe of an ear, so that the blood ran down my neck. And thus was I, Dick Treadgold, blooded, in both metaphor and fact, to a life of peril and adventure.

Whilst Joshua reloaded, I had a chance to double the distance between us. I headed inland, away from the shore, and made in the direction of the village which was more than a mile away. Straight in front of me was a clump of trees, and I hoped to gain this before Trust could fire again.

Though the country that lies south of the Downs, from the west of Worthing to the ancient city of Chichester, is, in the main, as flat as a table, this particular clump of trees was perched upon a rounded hillock--though you would call it that nowhere but in western Sussex; and therefore, when I gained the trees, I could survey the land on every side of me to the extent of a good square mile.

To the south were Joshua and Amos Baverstock, hastening after me, the latter some way behind his longer-legged companion. To the north, a little to the east, was the sharp belfry of the church in the village I would gain: and, to the west, was the lane that leads to Arundel.

I had paused for a moment, not so much for breath as to get my bearings, to select the shortest route; and in this brief moment, I became aware of a circumstance that caused my heart to leap for joy. For, coming toward me, by way of a footpath that led across the fields, carrying under an arm a brown paper parcel that I knew to contain his weekly stock of provisions, I recognised the great, tall figure of John Bannister himself.

All thoughts of my pursuers were instantly banished from my mind. What cared I now for Amos Baverstock and all his threats and oaths! I was conscious

of nothing else but the bald fact that a friend in need was close at hand--and one, moreover, who would soon get the best of Master Baverstock--and so great was my elation that I took no heed of a dog-cart which, at that moment, came rattling round a bend in the road.

I called loudly upon Bannister by name, though he was then scarcely within hearing, and dashed down the hill before Joshua could have reached the trees from the other side.

The road in that place was bounded by a wooden fence, and balancing myself upon the top of this, I shouted frantically to Bannister.

"Come quick!" I cried. "Amos Baverstock is here!"

I was answered, before the last word had left my lips, by a shot fired at the back of me. The bullet splintered the woodwork of the very bar upon which I was standing; and, startled into action, I jumped into the road.

Immediately I had to turn back again no less quickly, to avoid being run down by the dog-cart, the driver of which reined up with a jerk.

I looked up at him at once, thinking to recognise some farmer that I knew; but, instead of that, I set eyes, to my amazement, upon Mr. Gilbert Forsyth, with his side-whiskers and his greased moustache.

I remembered then--too late as things turned out--that the road curved seaward near the place where I had first discovered Amos and his friends. Had I thought of it at all, I must have known that they had never walked to that lonely spot. They had driven there, to leave the horse and cart upon the road, whilst they settled themselves at a little distance to discuss how best they might attack John Bannister, in his cabin by the sea. Moreover, had I known then as much as I know now of Mr. Gilbert Forsyth, I should never have supposed for a single instant that he could be as idle as he seemed, that he would have remained doing nothing before the opening of the cabin, whilst his friends were pursuing me.

For Gilbert Forsyth, a fop to all appearances and a lazy dude, was in reality a man of action. He said not a word to me, but when he had reined in his horse, he lifted his whip, and cut me down as if I were a thistle.

It was a long tandem whip--and tandems were much in fashion in the days when all this happened. The lash wrapped itself about my legs like a living snake; so that when Forsyth jerked the whip backwards with all his force, I was thrown violently on my face upon the hard, dusty road.

I tried to get to my feet as quick as I could, but had done no more than struggle to my knees, when Forsyth struck me upon the crown of my head with the heavy handle of the whip.

It was a cruel blow and a stout one; and I know that if I did not actually lose consciousness I, at least, saw the trees swing upward into the sky, and the white road upon which I lay rush round and round, like the spokes of a revolving wheel.

And then the next thing I knew was that Forsyth had me by the throat. Though I was then young, I was not a weakling. I struggled desperately, and might, perhaps, have freed myself, had not Joshua Trust arrived upon the scene in time to settle the affair the wrong way for me.

For he gathered me up in his arms, and I was held as if I were encased in iron. I shouted frantically, but that was of no more help than the cackling of a hen. I was lifted bodily into the cart.

I heard Joshua shout to Amos: "Run like mad! Here's Bannister himself!"

Forsyth had climbed upon the box. Trust was on the back seat, with me held like a squalling babe in his arms. The cart tilted forward a bit, as Amos scrambled up and took his seat beside the driver.

I heard Forsyth crack his whip, and immediately the horse started off at a canter, the cart rocking like a boat in a heavy sea. I continued to shout, until Joshua swore at me and clapped one of his great hands across my mouth. And the last thing I saw, as the cart turned into the main road to Littlehampton, was John Bannister breaking through the boundary fence, and then standing quite still and upright in the middle of the road, staring after us, with his brown paper parcel still under his arm.

CHAPTER V--I SET FORTH UPON MY VOYAGE

Though all these events took place more than fifty years ago, I have a very perfect recollection of that drive. In those days there was not much traffic on the Sussex roads; and we passed nothing on the way to Slindon save a hay-cart and a brewer's wagon. On neither occasion did I dare cry out for help, for Joshua Trust sat by the side of me with his loaded pistol, pressed close against my ribs, in the pocket of his sailor's pea-jacket. I never doubted for an instant that he would shoot. I had then, it is true, little experience of the world; but I could scarce fail to recognise that I was fallen into the hands of desperate men who counted human life of little worth.

So I kept my silence upon the road, wondering all the time what was to become of me, and, above all else, what Amos Baverstock would say when he discovered that I had cast away my fragment of the map.

That he thought I had it still was plain enough, since he twice told Joshua to keep an eye on me, lest I should throw it from the cart. He was in a great haste to reach the woods at Slindon, where in springtime the wild flowers are like a garden; and he had a good reason for this. Indeed, in all my experience of Amos, I never knew him fail for want of caution; and when a man is circumspect as well as fearless, he is an enemy who cannot be trifled with.

It was the scoundrel's design, so I discovered, to reach the woods with as little delay as possible, and there to wait until the evening, when he could take the Portsmouth road under cover of darkness. There were, at that date, many coaches on the highways; and Amos evidently thought it wiser not to trust me.

So to Slindon Woods we went, and were there in no time, soon after noon. They unharnessed the horse, and turned him out to graze; and whilst Mr. Forsyth unpacked a hamper that was well stocked with provisions and wine to drink, Amos took me by the shoulders, and looked me straight in the face.

"And now, boy," he said, "I'll have no more nonsense from you--so understand me, once and for all. It's an unwise thing to pry into my affairs--I can tell you that. You know more about me already than I care to think; and I tell you fairly, you had best mend your ways, if you value life."

I was afraid of the look of him, of the hard glitter in his eyes and the way in which his thin lips were tightly pressed together. And I was more afraid still of what would happen when he discovered that I had made away with my fragment of the torn map. My heart was in my mouth. I felt as if I were suspended by a thread upon the brink of a precipice, and that at any moment that thread would break and I be hurled into eternity.

Fortunately, perhaps, I was not left long in such uncertainty; for no sooner had Amos taken his hands from off my shoulders than he clapped them together behind his back, and came out with the very question that I feared.

"And where's the map, my boy?" said he.

I answered nothing.

"Give it up," he demanded, and held out a hand.

"I have not got it," said I.

At that his jaw dropped. He stared at me in amazement, not knowing whether or not to believe me.

"Haven't got it!" he repeated. "What d'ye mean?"

And the way he rapped out those last few words made my blood run cold. I saw, however, that I must make a clean breast of the matter, let it end which way it would.

"I have not got it," said I, "for a simple reason; because I had thrown it away before you caught me. And now, you know the truth, and can do with me what you will."

The hunchback stood staring at me as if I were a ghost. His thin, wrinkled face had gone a yellow or a greenish colour, and his little eyes looked blacker and more on fire than ever. He kept working his mouth about, as if he were chewing some of his vile tobacco; and, on the whole, I cannot conceive an expression more menacing, a countenance less prepossessing.

He came up to me, and searched my pockets; and whilst he was doing so, I noticed that both his hands were trembling. He had then been joined by both Trust and Forsyth, who stood on either side of him.

Amos, as he drew away from me, came out with an oath that I can never write. Indeed, the swearing of this man was not the least of his many sins.

"He has not got it!" he cried. "We've been fooled, Mr. Forsyth; and that by a slip of a boy!"

I thought that he would kill me, then and there, beneath the shadow of the trees in Slindon Woods. But, though Amos Baverstock often worked himself into fits of ungovernable fury, he never was guilty of a foolish action. For my life--though at the time I never guessed it--was of some use to him. Not only did I know where I had hidden the torn map, but, as like as not, I had looked at it, and might be able to remember the names of some of the places that were marked thereon--knowledge for which Amos would give much. Had it not been for this, I have little doubt he would have put me out of the world.

They tied my feet together, in case I should endeavour to escape, whilst the three seated themselves upon the gnarled surface roots of a great oak tree, and examined their fragment of the map, discussing the question openly, so that I overheard them and learned of the trick that Providence had played us all.

For the map had been rent in twain, not by the hands of Amos Baverstock and me, but by the sure and supple fingers of Almighty Destiny. Amos had in his possession at least three-quarters of the parchment--he had it all, indeed, except one corner, that which I had seized in my attempt to wrench it from his grasp. And, as good luck had it, that one corner contained the information of the greatest value: to wit, the exact locality where the Greater Treasure was to be found.

As for the rest of the map, it carried you from the outskirts of what may pass as modern civilisation to within a certain unknown distance of the secret place. It put you on the right road, as it were, and then left you--lost in the midst of a wilderness of doubt.

When Amos grasped the full significance of this, he jumped to his feet, a perfect figure of fury, storming at me and swearing, using threats and shouting of torture, if I did not then and there confess. But speak I would not. Whatever

happened, I was resolved to hold my ground, though I was filled with grave misgivings.

For all that afternoon they badgered me, trying intimidation, bribery and curses; and then, at last, they settled it amongst themselves that they would take me with them into Portsmouth, and thence across the sea into the very heart of a black barbarous country, where they hoped to find the Treasure of the Incas.

It was then, whilst we waited in the woods for sunset, that I saw myself, a lad of sixteen summers, launched upon a series of adventures, among strange peoples and in wild, romantic lands--adventures such as those of which I had often read, of the bold Spaniards who had followed Columbus into a new and unknown world, and brave blades of the stamp of Drake and Grenville, who--like John Bannister himself--were all men of Devon. That I was to be one of a company so glorious seemed to me all my heart could wish, though I went as a hostage with my life itself at ransom.

In a strange fashion, in very truth, did I begin my travels; for I journeyed that night to Portsmouth, not only bound hand and foot and tied to the seat of the dog-cart, but gagged as well; so that, by the time we reached our destination, I ached in every limb.

For three weeks we dwelt together in a lodging-house, patronised by seamen, in a poor quarter of the town. The landlord--a fat, slovenly fellow whose hand was seldom far from a pint mug or near a razor--was, as I guessed, hand in glove with Amos; for he must have known that throughout those three dreary weeks I was kept locked in a stuffy room, where I had neither fresh air nor liberty, and no better fare than is accorded to a convict.

I have said that we dwelt together, but this was not wholly so; for Mr. Gilbert Forsyth, though he was often of our party, had taken rooms in one of the best hotels. He was a gentleman somewhat fastidious in his habits, with a nice taste in wine and clothes, though--as he was soon to prove--he could rough it with the best of us.

Joshua, too, was seldom in our lodgings. It appears that he spent most of his time in the neighbourhood of the docks, on the lookout for an old shipmate whom he knew he could trust, with whom Amos could strike a bargain.

Such a man was eventually found. Joshua brought him in, one evening, and shortly afterwards Mr. Forsyth arrived, looking more than ever as if he had just come out of a bandbox.

This fellow proved to be the skipper of a barque, due to sail in a few days' time, bound for Caracas in Venezuela. She must call first at Liverpool, to take on a cargo of cotton goods, but would touch at no port upon the voyage but Fayal in the Western Islands, which are now called the Azores.

All this fitted in exceedingly well with Amos's plans. As I was in the next

room when they talked the matter out, and they never troubled to close the door, I know for a fact that Baverstock bribed the skipper, and that Forsyth--who I suspected all along had undertaken to produce the funds--paid him as much as fifty pounds down, quite apart from the question of passage money, and there was more to come at the end of the voyage.

Gilbert Forsyth, indeed, was a member of the expedition for no other reason than that he supplied the sinews of war, else Amos had never taken him into his confidence and agreed to forego a third part of the loot. For all that, Forsyth proved himself a man of action and resource, though he never looked it; and things would have gone worse with Amos than they did, had he not had at his right hand one so capable and cool throughout those wild, adventurous days.

For Joshua Trust was well enough in his way to strike a blow or carry a camp-kettle across a mountain range that topped the clouds--otherwise he was a bull-in-a-china-shop kind of a fellow, whose worth was in his forearms and not his head.

But Forsyth was cast in a finer mould: a man of education, with tags of Latin in the corners of memory, a sense of humour--subtle enough to be lost upon both his strange companions--and a wonderful brain for figures.

The man's laziness was all pretence and affectation. He always talked as if he were half asleep, and yawned at intervals, screening his mouth with a hand upon one of the fingers of which he wore a golden signet ring; and yet, his brain was ever active, and he had the happy knack of doing the right thing at the right time--as he had already proved to my cost.

Even whilst I lay imprisoned in that dingy room in Portsmouth, Forsyth returned along the coast to within a stone's throw of John Bannister's cabin by the sea, and searched vainly for the fragment of the map which I had thrown away. And that in itself was a bold thing to do; for the police--to whom Bannister had described the appearance of both Baverstock and Trust--had been told of my disappearance, and the countryside, from Arundel to Chichester, was populous with printed offers of reward.

For, all this time, my mother was well near distracted by anxiety and distress. John Bannister called upon her, and tried in his own straightforward way to set her fears at rest, and swore to her that he would find me, though he had to search the world.

Of how well he kept his oath it is my task to write, and of much else besides. For the barque, which was called the *Mary Greenfield*, dropped her pilot off the Needles of the Isle of Wight, and with a fair wind and under full canvas struck the open sea. And I, Dick Treadgold, was on board, sea-sick that night as any full-grown man could be, and sick at heart as well. For, when the white cliffs of dearest England faded in the evening light, I realised for the first time that I was

alone, and there was no telling what the Fates held in store for me.

CHAPTER VI--I AM CONCERNED IN A MUTINY

I have neither space nor patience to describe in any detail that long and tedious voyage. For we were months at sea. I saw whales spouting water into the air, and schools of porpoises; and at one time, for a whole month on end, we were becalmed, the ship lying idle in the midst of a vast floating mass of seaweed, where there were all kinds of jelly-fish and squids. The heat was excessive, and there was a rank, almost putrid, smell in the air, which came from the decaying seaweed. That in itself was enough to try the temper of every member of the crew; but, to make matters worse, much of the tinned meat on board exploded in the hold. I cannot explain this, but I know that it happened, and am content to leave the explanation to the scientific reader. These circumstances, together with the surly nature of James Dagg, the captain, led from dissatisfaction to open grumbling, and thence to the mutiny of which I have now to tell.

My own fortunes were, to some extent, involved in that affair; and in any case, I must describe the incident more or less as it occurred, since nothing could better serve to illustrate the true character of Amos Baverstock, who plays as important a part as myself in the narrative that follows.

I had not been a week at sea, and just recovered from my sickness, when I was given clearly to understand that I was to hold no intercourse with any of the crew. I cannot say that I wished to, for they were a ruffianly lot--half of them, I verily believe, prison-birds, like Joshua Trust, and the remainder West Indian negroes, Chinamen, and Lascars from the coast of Malabar.

I had to share a cabin with Amos himself, who seldom let me out of his sight. Thrown into such close intimacy with the man, I learned much concerning him, and he more of me. He seldom allowed a day to pass without questioning me in regard to what I knew of the map; and so terrible did his threats become that I was filled with fear for the future.

On that account, I yearned for a friend, someone in whom I could confide; and it was not long before I found such a man on board that pestilential ship. Now that I can look back upon my series of adventures, I can see both men and matters in their true perspective, and I realise that, had it not been for William Rushby, the boatswain of the *Mary Greenfield*, the most honest and the whitest man that ever piped all hands on deck, this tale had never been told.

When I saw him first, I sized him up as the true seaman that he was; but I dared not speak to him, because of the threats that had been heaped upon me. I knew also that I could go to none of the ship's officers with my story, for they were all tarred with the same brush as the skipper; but Providence before long gave me the chance I wanted.

When we were in mid-ocean Amos tired of the voyage, and required little persuasion from Mr. Forsyth to take to playing cards. Captain Dagg was a card-player, too, and Joshua made the fourth; and this was the party that sat down nightly after supper to gamble, drink and smoke, by the light of a reeking paraffin lamp in the little stuffy saloon.

I watched them play for many nights, and though I knew nothing of the game, it was quite clear to me that they were three babes at the business by the side of Mr. Forsyth. For it was he who always won, no matter with whom he played or what cards he held, and it was he who raked in their money.

This was all one to me. I soon tired of watching them; and when I had once slipped away from them, to breathe the fresh air on deck, and no questions had been asked, I made it my constant practice to sit of an evening upon the poop, whence I could look down into the water and see the phosphorus as if smouldering in the wake of the ship.

And here it was that I talked with William Rushby. At that hour it was his duty to see that the ship's lamps were lighted, and when he had hoisted the mast-head lights, and put the red light to port and the green to starboard, he would come aft, haul in the log, and speak to me in whispers.

That he took that precaution from the first makes it plain enough that he guessed some mischief was afoot. He questioned me concerning who I was and what business I had in such company on board that ship. It was some time before I dared tell him the truth, for fear of Amos Baverstock; but I did so in the end, making him swear to keep my secret; which he did.

"It is all like a fairy tale," said he, when he had heard my story; "and it's hard to tell the best way to help you. Of this much I am certain: if you set forth into the back country of Venezuela with a man like Baverstock, you'll not come back alive."

"But I cannot escape!" I protested. "Even on board this ship, I am watched at all hours of the night and day."

Rushby thought for a while, stroking his short black beard which was like that of a Russian Czar.

"Maybe," said he, "at Caracas, I could desert and take you with me. I have no liking for my shipmates here, as you may well imagine. In the meantime, many weeks must pass before we sight the mainland, and in that time much may happen."

As he said this with some significance, I asked him what he meant.

"Why, just this," he answered; "there's trouble brewing aboard, which will come to a head before we touch port. The crew are a low-down, blackguard lot, no better men than sailors; and though they may be held to blame for that, it's no fault of theirs if they are fed worse than swine and cursed from dawn to sunset. Dagg I had heard about, though I never signed on under him before, nor will again, and the mate's even worse. There's high talk in the fo'c'sle, as it is, where the ringleader is that nigger cook. Mark my words--and I've sailed the seas for more than twenty years--a prize-fighting negro in the galley can cause more mischief aboard a sailing-ship than a monkey and a woman, both in one."

I laughed, for I was not then accustomed to the talk of sailors.

"And they've run out of lime-juice," he went on; "and that's a serious thing."

"Lime-juice!" I repeated, thinking he was joking still.

"A man must eat vegetables," he explained to me, "to keep his blood cool and his liver nicely trimmed. You can't eat green cabbages and Brussels-sprouts in mid-Atlantic, so you must carry lime-juice aboard; and we've run out. The men have much to complain of. They are in ill health, and one or two should be lying up in a sick berth, instead of being sworn at left and right for not moving quicker. So I see trouble ahead. It may be a hurricane, or just a summer squall; and if the first, Heaven help James Dagg and his officers, for they're a tough lot for'ard, as I know who've listened to their talk."

And Rushby was proved to be in the right. We ran into a great calm as I have said. The sea was like glass; and though the sun was blotted out by a steam-like fog, the heat was so intense that we went about the deck in naught but vests and trousers, with the sweat dripping from our finger-tips.

Without a doubt, the crew suffered for lack of lime-juice; some broke out with a horrid skin disease. And then the news came that the tinned meat had all gone bad, and we were forced to live on salted ling-fish, so that we went thirsty all day long.

It was Ebenezer Hogg, the negro cook, who started all the trouble. He was a long, raw-boned Jamaica man, who had cut a figure in the prize-ring in his younger days. He had never forgiven the skipper for a blow across the mouth because the cabin potatoes had not been properly peeled, though this was the work of Ah Chin, the cook's mate, a half-daft Canton Chinaman, who would fire

off crackers at all hours of the night, in honour (I suppose) of the heathen gods he worshipped.

Hogg told his shipmates he cared not a "dime with a hole in it" for James Dagg or any man. They had no food fit to eat, so they might as well help themselves to the ship's grog, to keep--as he described it--body and soul together.

Rushby--as his duty was--warned the captain of what was coming; but Dagg, who had been losing heavily at cards to Mr. Forsyth, only abused the boatswain for his pains, and said that he himself was the best judge of such matters and would know how to deal with insubordination.

And that night the crew, led by Hogg, the nigger, broke into the storeroom with a hatchet and broached the rum casks. Within half-an-hour, they were all roaring drunk; and that was a night that I shall never live to forget.

The moon came out from the white sea-mist, as if to look down in scandalised amazement upon a scene of debauchery and violence--a round, red ball of fire, casting its rays upon the stagnant, reeking seaweed, illuminating the deck of that floating madhouse with a dull crimson glare, whereby you might see the whites of men's eyes and the glitter of the sharp blades they handled.

Dagg appeared on deck, his face livid with passion; and I could see by his walk that he, too, had been drinking heavily at his card-playing.

"What's all this?" he shouted at the top of his voice. "Understand, I'll have no monkey-tricks aboard the ship that I command."

Hogg at once squared up to him, his two fists before his face, very drunk and brazen.

"Come on, James Dagg!" he cried, with his Christy-minstrel accent. "Time yer and me settled de account."

"This here's mutiny!" exclaimed the captain.

"Dat's de right word, boss," said Hogg. "Mutiny it is."

And at that, he struck the captain with his fist, so that Dagg rolled over and over upon the deck, groaning loudly.

The fat was now in the fire. If discipline could be restored, Hogg would be hanged at the yard-arm and his body cast into the sea; and drunk as he was, the nigger knew it.

"I'm de captain of dis ship," he bellowed, "an' James Dagg's de cook."

He showed his white teeth in a grin, and then gave orders as if he had been accustomed all his life to a position of authority; and the wonder was he was instantly obeyed. Five minutes later, both Dagg and his mate were bound hand and foot; and the second mate had been locked in his cabin, where he was fast asleep. The negro went staggering backwards and forwards, from the forecastle to the poop, crying out that he it was who was Captain and his name was Admiral Hogg.

There were two spectators of this comedy, who could not be considered as partisans; and the one was William Rushby and the other was myself. The boatswain's sense of duty would have held him to the captain, had it not been for me; for, though I had no liking for any of the crew, and a feeling of positive loathing for a great brute like Hogg, I saw in the discomfiture of James Dagg and his officers some chance of my own ultimate deliverance. So that when the cook turned upon me, and caught me by the scruff of the neck, I played the card that I thought safest at the time, but which certainly lost me the trick that meant the game.

"And now, boy," said Hogg, "which way de wind blow wid you? Will you sign on to serve as cabin-steward under Admiral Hogg?"

"Why, sure," said I, having picked up something of the man's own way of speaking. "I was never a friend of Captain Dagg's, as you may have seen for yourself."

And thereupon, I looked away from the negro's grinning countenance, and straight in the black, pig-like eyes of Amos Baverstock.

If I had feared him before, I was well-nigh terrified of him then; for there was black murder in the look he gave me, and his mouth was working horribly.

For all that, he straightened his face in half a second, and turned to Hogg as calm as the sea itself.

"I'll settle with you in a moment," said he. "I've not lived more than half my life without learning how to deal with a buck nigger who's three parts tipsy. Bo's'n," said he to Rushby, pointing straight at me, "put that boy in irons."

Rushby never moved.

"Did you hear my orders?" rapped out Amos.

"I heard right enough," said the boatswain. "But I'm not here to take orders from you."

At that, the crew, who had gathered round, thinking that Rushby was with them, became bolder than ever. Knives were drawn from belts, and one of these was flourished in the face of the captain who still lay upon the deck, bound hand and foot.

"Ho!" cried Amos. "So that's your tune, is it? I see you must all be taught a lesson."

He talked with all the confidence in the world, though--with the exception of Mr. Gilbert Forsyth, who had just strolled on deck with both hands in his trouser pockets--there was no one at his back, and he faced a crowd of angry, drunken seamen who would not then have stopped short of murder.

From Rushby he turned once more to Hogg. "And so," said he, "you claim to be the captain of this ship?"

The negro glanced in his direction, but would not meet those cruel, steadfast

eyes.

"If I'm not," he blurted out, "then who is de captain? Tell me dat?"

"Why, I am," roared Amos. "And what have you to say to it?"

Hogg realised he was challenged. Perhaps, under the influence of rum, he had already gone further than he meant to; but, in any case, so far as he was concerned there was no question of retreat.

"Put up your fists!" he shouted. "We fight for it and let de best man win."

He grinned from ear to ear, as, standing in front of Amos--above whom he towered by a good clear head and shoulders--he lifted his great, black fists to the level of his face. I thought that he would kill Amos with a single blow; for the one was so big and bony, and the other so frail and shrivelled up. But I did not then know Amos Baverstock.

"Come on!" cried Hogg, still grinning.

I looked at Amos, thinking to find him alarmed; but never upon the face of any man have I beheld an expression of such complete contempt.

"You black dog!" said he, with an oath.

He drew back his right hand, as if about to strike, and immediately I caught the glint of a revolver barrel in the moonlight.

There was a flash, a single loud report, and then a dull, heavy thud as the negro's great ungainly body came down upon the deck. And there he lay, full in the red moonshine, upon that tropic night, huddled and stone-dead--the black, bragging fool who had claimed to be our captain.

"And now, then," said Amos, as cool as ever, turning to the crew, "is there any man else who would like to command this ship?"

CHAPTER VII--AND AM MADE TO PAY FOR IT

And that was the end of the mutiny on board the *Mary Greenfield.* The match was struck by a negro; the flames were fed with rum; and the fire flared up, just to be stamped out by the one strong man on board.

Amos at once released both the captain and his mate; whereupon Dagg treated the crew to a long-winded, high speech upon the subject of what he would do, if such insubordination occurred again; but as he had done naught during the crisis, but to get knocked down the moment he opened his mouth, there were few of his audience who were not laughing up their sleeves.

I have told the full story of the disturbance, to illustrate the character of Amos Baverstock. I have yet to write of the sequel to the trouble, which more nearly concerned myself.

For Amos was as good as his word, and made short work of William Rushby and of me. Though the crew had been bound over to keep the peace, as you might call it, admonished to behave themselves in future, the boatswain was not only degraded of his rank, but forthwith cast into irons.

As for myself, I was led before a kind of tribunal, assembled in the saloon. Captain Dagg, Amos Baverstock, and Joshua Trust were my judges; and a strange triumvirate they made, Amos chewing his black cigar, and all three seated before their glasses of grog, with their greasy playing-cards scattered before them on the table.

"Boy," said Dagg, "you joined in a mutiny. Do you know that, you whelp? Do you know what it means?"

"No, sir," said I.

"It means death," said Dagg. "The yard-arm--that's what it means."

I believed, for the moment, that they were really going to kill me; and so seriously had the great heat and the excitement affected me that I don't think I cared very much whether they did so or not. Anyway, I know I answered boldly, though I had never the courage to look straight at Amos, whose eyes I felt were upon me.

"Captain Dagg," said I, "if you want to murder me, get on with the matter. I ask you to do no more than to remember this: I did not come on board your ship of my own free will. I was kidnapped, and carried here by force, and I have no means of escape."

At that, Amos struck the table with his fist; and, bold though my words had been, I jumped as if a cannon had been fired.

"Silence!" he roared. "We are not here to argue with you. You were given your orders. You were told that on no account were you to communicate with anyone on board this ship, and you defied us. We have reason to suspect that you have taken into your confidence William Rushby, formerly boatswain. Do you deny it?"

He banged the table again. I looked right into his face, and it was just as if I was under fire. But I could never answer him. I had the pluck neither to lie nor to tell the truth.

"Good!" said he. "You admit as much. Well, then, we shall see that no such tricks are played us in the future. Rushby is in irons. As for you, for the rest of this voyage you remain a prisoner in your cabin; and if we have any more trouble with you--I warn you fairly--you meet the same fate as that hide-bound, cursed nigger."

And that was the lame and impotent conclusion of the mutiny on board the *Mary Greenfield.*

My lot was now even worse than before. For week after week I was locked in a stuffy cabin, and got neither fresh air, good food, nor exercise. The calm broke up quite suddenly with a squall, followed by a shower of rain. For about an hour the water came down like a cascade upon the sea, washing the ship from stem to stern, giving--as it appeared to me, looking out from my narrow port-hole--new life to the floating seaweed and the myriads of living things that were swarming in the midst of it.

The ship rocked, turning lazily from side to side, like a sleeper awakening, and then, lurching, took on a list to starboard, as the wind gripped her hoisted sails. And then, once again, we were under canvas, ploughing westward across that great, lonely ocean.

A few days later, we struck a trade wind, and made even better progress. Though I myself was never more miserable in all my life, I had reason to think that there was less discontent on board. I could hear the patter of the bare feet of the men on the deck above me, as they hastened about their work, as sailors should, and the shrill note of the boatswain's whistle--which caused me to wonder who the new boatswain was. It must be understood that during these days of my imprisonment I had nothing to read and nothing to do, but to meditate upon my own misfortunes.

Life was not made any the more pleasant for me inasmuch as I still shared a cabin with Amos, though I was devoutly thankful that I saw little of him. Night by night, he would sit late at cards, trying--I should imagine--to win back what he had lost to Mr. Forsyth; and I made a point of being asleep, or pretending to be so, before he came to bed.

And now I have to tell of something which has a direct bearing upon all that follows. I had become so despondent and forlorn, and I found myself in the company of such infamous and shameless rogues, that I had actually forgotten my friends. I had forgotten that there were yet in the world true, honest men who could be both brave and loyal.

One evening, I must confess, my heart was near to breaking. The world seemed all so hopeless and so wicked that I brought my face to my hands and cried just as I had been wont to cry, when I was a little chap of four years old, when things had not gone for me exactly as I wanted. And as I sobbed, I could

hear the gamblers in the saloon beyond the cabin door; the "clink" of the bottles and the glasses, and the deeper note of the coins upon the table; now and again, a gruff oath from Amos or Joshua Trust, and Mr. Forsyth's affected drawl. And then, a voice, quite near to me, whispered in my ear:

"Me lad, be quick! I want a word with you."

I sprang to my feet--I had been lying on my berth--and looked about me. I could see no one in the cabin, and had begun to think of ghosts and spirit-voices, when I heard the whispering again.

"Here, me lad! The port-hole."

I looked at the port, and could see a face by the light of the oil lamp--a face in a frame studded with stars, the face of a man with a short stump of a grisly beard.

"Rushby!" I exclaimed.

"The same," said he. "But speak low, for Heaven's sake! Those rascals are at their cards in the saloon; the door's thin, and it's all up with us if we're discovered."

I went to the port-hole, so that my face was close to his.

"But how are you here?" I asked.

"I've not lived my life and done my duty," said he, "without making friends. One of the crew, of the name of Adams, to whom I have been of service in the past, has let me loose--just as you might unchain a yard-dog for a run. I have a few minutes at the best before I'm back in irons, but that's enough for what I have to say."

"But where are you now?" I asked, for he appeared to me to be walking upon the sea.

He explained that he was hanging on to a rope, made fast to a stanchion on the deck above, but that he had something of greater importance to tell me.

"Are we near our journey's end?" I asked.

"In three days," he answered, "we should sight the coast, unless the wind changes. What they intend to do with me at Caracas I neither know nor care. I will somehow find the means to escape, and make my way back to England; and then, Captain Dagg and Amos Baverstock shall pay for what they've done."

"I entreat you," I exclaimed, "do not meddle with Amos!"

Rushby laughed softly.

"And leave you at his mercy!" he cried. "That's not my way, nor--I should think, if all you have told me be the truth--the way of Mr. Bannister. This matter shall never rest where it now stands. I am here to learn two things, though I am no better than a simple sailor, and it will want a wiser head than mine before we're safe in port. Come, tell me, lad, where did you hide the map you snatched from Baverstock? John Bannister may want it."

"In a rabbit-hole," said I; and I went on to describe, as best I could, how that

rabbit-hole might be found.

"There's a warren," said I, "about two hundred yards to the west of Bannister's cabin----"

"And how am I to find that?" Rushby took me up.

I thought for a moment; and then I got a bright idea when most I needed it, for I realised there was little time to spare and that Amos, at any moment, might enter and find Rushby at the port-hole.

I gave him my mother's address; for I had little doubt that Bannister had gone, long before this, to her. With my life in danger, he would--I knew--soon get the better of his natural dread of women.

"That's all I want," said he.

And a moment after he was gone. It so happened that many months were to elapse before I set eyes upon him again--a true man and an honest, big of heart and strong of hand, the type that has made the very name of British sailor to rank so highly all the world across, from the old three-decker to the battle-cruiser of to-day. And I speak of the men without whose cutlasses and courage Blake and Drake, or even Nelson himself, had never been the famous admirals that they were.

For, when we were come to Caracas, I was discharged from that poisonous vessel like a worthless bale of freight. Unshipped by night into a broken-down two-wheeled cart, and conveyed through the narrow streets of an evil-smelling city, where men talked loudly in a foreign tongue, with quarrelsome voices and much waving of the hands, and then I found myself in a dirty hovel upon the slopes of tree-clad hills, where I could see the round moon through a great hole in the roof, and lie listening to the singing of millions of crickets, wondering what would be the end of it all.

CHAPTER VIII--INTO THE WILDERNESS

For these few days, it happened that I was left in the charge of Joshua Trust. In other words, he was the watch-dog that guarded me, day and night; and a dull dog

he was. He never opened his mouth, save to grumble at everything--the heat, the insects, the very food he cooked himself. Now and again, he would sigh; which puzzled me, until I solved the problem for myself: he was inclined to regret the idle days aboard the *Mary Greenfield* when he had naught to think about except his grog and cards.

So, in this man's company, I learned nothing concerning what was afoot. But I was free to use my eyes, and I could scarce fail to observe that they were turning by degrees that ruined habitation into a kind of depôt. For, day and night, came stores and arms and ammunition to the place--all manner of such things as might be required upon an expedition into the wild hinterland of that strange country, where there were few roads, but many bridle-paths and broad rivers to be crossed.

Amos came often to the hut, and Mr. Forsyth was always with him; and, as I knew, it was the last-named who had paid for all. That, however, was all one to me. I was safely caught, thousands of miles from dear, silly Sussex; and even if I was so fortunate as to escape from Joshua Trust, what was I to do in that foreign land, where I could not speak a word of the language and had no friend to whom to go?

On the fourth day of my captivity came six mules, and with them three men whom I took to be half-castes of a sort, for they were no more than two parts black and spoke Spanish, shouting at one another when they conversed. But I was more interested in the mules, which were of a kind that I had never seen before; for they were small animals, little larger than donkeys, with mouse-grey woolly coats like sheep. Each of these was provided with a pack-saddle; and when they were loaded for the inspection of Amos Baverstock and Forsyth, I was amazed at the great weight that such slender and seemingly fragile beasts could carry.

On the fifth day after we had left the ship, we set forth upon our great march towards the south. Our party numbered eight in all: Amos, Forsyth, and Trust (the first the acknowledged leader of the expedition); myself and the three mulemen, whilst the other was a guide--a lean, cadaverous Spaniard, black as a raven, whom I never heard called by any other name than that of Vasco. I do not think this fellow was an evil man by nature, except in so far as he was capable of doing almost anything for money. In that, at any rate, he was honest: he served his masters faithfully, no matter who they were.

And now we come to the march itself that, step by step, led me farther and farther from the confines of civilisation and into the heart of a cruel and magic wilderness where things happened that I should not believe, had I not seen them with my eyes.

The first stage of our journey was uneventful enough; and the scenery--especially on the mountains we were obliged to cross--surprisingly beautiful. We

first climbed to a great height, following a zig-zag road, along which the little mules struggled gallantly with their heavy loads. I had thought that, on gaining the crestline, we must again descend to something approaching the level of the sea. But this was not so; for the mountains proved to consist of a series of parallel chains, and no sooner had we negotiated one valley than we found ourselves upon the watershed of another.

These valleys were thickly populated. We were seldom out of sight of villages and towns, many of which contained considerable buildings. The country had the aspect of being extremely fertile and prosperous. There were plantations of coffee and cocoa, tobacco and cotton, but a far greater area of the valley regions was given over to the cultivation of manioc and maize. For all I could ever learn, there was no flour in the land, for I never tasted bread, but subsisted upon hot maize cakes, made by Vasco, the guide, which I found as good as hot-cross buns.

When we were clear of the mountains, we began to descend into the valley of a great river which, had I learned more geography when I was at school, I would have known to be the Orinoco. The course of this great stream we followed for many days, marching in a south-westerly direction, against the current. The climate was now a great deal hotter than it had been near the coast, and towns and villages were few and far between. One thing that I observed was the courteous behaviour of the inhabitants, who seldom failed to wave their hands to us and pass the time of day.

We came to a vast sea of grass where, here and there, were scattered woods; and finally, after crossing a river of some importance, a tributary of the Orinoco, we sighted a great mountain that overtopped the surrounding hills like a giant in the midst of pygmies.

Amos, who had been unusually reticent upon the line-of-march, now became talkative, almost hilarious. He carried constantly a grin upon his fox-like countenance, and would often chuckle to himself.

For the great mountain in front of us might be described as the gateway of the road to the Treasure we were seeking, and was marked upon the left-hand top corner of the map. It was called Mount Tigro, but by that name I have never been able to trace it upon any modern map, though it was shown to be about twenty miles south of the Rio Guaviare.

We were now--though I did not know it at the time--close upon the frontier of Colombia, and, I think, for a time our route lay through that little-known country, until we turned eastward again into the territories of the Amazonas.

We were now in a mountainous and savage land, where we could make but the slowest progress. For not only were the hills steep and pathless, but in places clothed in such luxuriant vegetation that we had often to break a way with hatchets for the mules.

We were marching by the map, and Amos had become our guide. He and Forsyth--who never seemed to tire--would lead our little column, myself walking in company of Joshua, and the pack-mules bringing up the rear.

We were soon to bid good-bye to these faithful, dumb companions; for, after we had climbed the slopes of another range of mountains, we followed the course of a river valley that led us rapidly downward, to land us into the very heart of such a forest as I did not dream to be possible.

The mulemen were paid off--by no means too handsomely, I thought--to return upon that long and tedious journey to the coast. And we five went on alone--Amos and his two confederates, Vasco and myself--carrying our stores and provisions in knapsacks on our backs, and all armed as though we were like to meet with savage men.

In the first place, I must tell you that the heat was insufferable, for all this while we had been approaching the equator. The forest swarmed with myriads of stinging insects, and sometimes I saw great tree snakes of a magnitude that even now makes my blood run cold when I think of them. We came upon one, lying half coiled upon the bank of a woodland pool, and I am ready to swear that he was longer than a cricket-pitch, and of a thickness almost equal to my own waist.

But I marvelled most at the forest trees, the names of some of which I learned from Vasco, who had a little English, of which he was exceedingly vain. One of these was a palm-tree, the very leaves of which were forty feet in length, standing almost erect, all bunched together--a magnificent sight to behold. And these forest giants were intertwined and intermingled with thousands of creepers, parasites, and climbers, so that in places, even at mid-day, when the tropic sun was at its height, it was dark as night in the vast Region of the Woods.

For weeks we struggled onward, literally fighting our way through that all but impenetrable wilderness. I saw that Amos had more than he could do to trace our route upon the map; and there were times, I am convinced, when even Vasco and Baverstock himself truly believed that we were lost.

He told us he was looking for a certain landmark; and in that dark and endless forest he might as well have searched for a pin. At one time, there was not a living soul within hundreds of miles of us. There were great alligators in the rivers that we crossed by means of rough dug-out canoes, which we made upon one bank and left upon the other; the jungle teemed with snakes, many of the venomous kind besides the great loathsome pythons, in whose coils an ox might have been crushed to death; thousands of gaily-coloured birds were among the tree-tops high above us, and the dead leaves about our pathway swarmed with little things that crept and crawled and stung so vilely that we were covered from head to foot with painful swellings. But never a sign did we see of any human being. Nature reigned in that black wilderness, untrammelled and supreme.

And then, as one steps on a sudden from a darkened room, we came forth one morning from the forest into the blazing light of the sun. And there was such a wonder as I had never seen before.

Before us was a plain upon which was growing a tall, reed-like grass; and in the centre of this plain was a long, hog-backed hillock, bare of trees. Remember, we were in the very heart of the Unknown, for months we had seen no sign or trace of humanity, and I, at least, judged myself to be hundreds of miles from the very outposts of the civilised world; and yet, upon the summit of this hillock was a great ruined palace or a temple, encircled by a colonnade of vast stone pillars, no less in their proportions than those of Stonehenge, on Salisbury Plain in England, only they were there by the score, and stood perpendicular and massive, not one having fallen from its place.

I stood rooted in amazement, when my attention was attracted by Amos, whose behaviour was now that of a madman. He threw both his arms into the air, which action--in view of his hunched back and his pig-like, glittering eyes--made him look more evil and gleeful than ever, and shouted at the top of his voice:

"Found!" he cried. "The Temple of Cahazaxa, who fled from Cuzco with the Treasure! And now, boy, the matter rests with you!"

He changed as in a flash from unbounded joy to passion. He seized me by the shoulders, gripping me so tightly that it was as if his fingers burned into my flesh like red-hot irons.

"I'll have the truth from you!" he shrieked, dancing like a maniac on his feet. "The truth, and nothing but the truth! Or else, I swear as I'm a living man, you die here and now."

"What truth?" I asked.

My voice was trembling; for so terrible did the man seem that a cold sweat had broken out upon my forehead. He drew nearer to me still, peering into my face and whispering.

"Henceforward," said he, "you guide us. Either you have seen the map or Bannister has told you all he knows. In any case, you guide us from here to the place where the Greater Treasure is hid. Refuse, and you die, here and now, in the midst of this almighty desert."

One glance at the man was enough to tell me that he meant every word he said. And yet, I do not think I was any longer afraid.

CHAPTER IX--I AM LEFT TO MY DOOM

I was now, it was apparent, in such a situation that my life was of little worth. Without doubt, Amos did believe that I was capable of guiding our little column to the place where the Greater Treasure was hidden.

He thought, perhaps, that I had looked at the fragment of the map I had snatched from his hand, or else that John Bannister had told me the full story.

As a matter of fact, I knew nothing. When flying for my very life from Amos, I had had other things to think of than to gratify a very natural curiosity, and had never so much as cast a glance at the map. And as for Bannister, I have said already this was the one subject upon which he could never or seldom be induced to talk.

Amos, however, held a contrary opinion. Somehow, he must have learned that for several months John Bannister had been a good friend to me, and in his own mind had never questioned that I knew all there was to know.

In either case, it was all the same to him; for my life was worth nothing if I could not help him in the furtherance of his purpose, and I was but a fifth mouth to feed in a wild, tropic region where food was difficult to find.

That day I had a stormy scene with Amos, who was supported by Mr. Forsyth, whose questions I found even more difficult to answer; whilst Joshua Trust stood by, tugging at his red beard, which had now become more untidy and unkempt than ever. As for Vasco, he sat at a little distance, cross-legged, looking in a puzzled manner from Amos Baverstock to me.

I swore on my oath to them that Bannister had told me nothing; but they would not believe me. Then, for the first time, I was shown the map which Amos had brought with him all the way from Sussex; and at once I observed a singular coincidence.

For the parchment had been rent across the very place where was marked the great ruined building even then before us; and all Amos had of it was the

following inscription: THE ANCIENT TEMPLE OF C---- and then came the torn edge, where I had held the parchment tightly between my thumb and forefinger.

But this information, slight as it was, had been enough for Amos, who knew well the story of Cahazaxa, the Peruvian prince, of whom I will tell in the proper place. Both Bannister and Amos had heard often of Cahazaxa's Temple, which might be regarded as a kind of half-way house upon our treasure hunt. And upon the other portion of the map, which I had hidden in a rabbit-hole, were the letters "AHAZAXA," plain enough to any one who had ever heard of the temple, and thence the route marked plainly to the secret place where the Greater Treasure lay.

Had Bannister ever shown me the map, I should in all probability have remembered the names of some of the places marked thereon; but he had never done so--which, after all, saved me a world of trouble at one of the most critical moments in my life.

For, had I known, I trust I would never have confessed to these unholy scoundrels. I like to think that my courage would not have failed me at the eleventh hour. As it was, being wholly ignorant, I had nothing to tell, and boldly declared as much, though both the hunchback and Mr. Forsyth thought me to be lying.

The former worked himself into a kind of frenzied passion. Gripping me by a wrist, he jerked me first in one direction, then in another, sometimes so violently that my head flew backward and forward like a weather-cock in the wind.

"We'll have the truth from you!" he shouted. "I'll have it, though I must tear it from you with red-hot irons."

"I know nothing," I persisted.

"You'll speak or die," he answered. "And I'll see to it that death does not come easy!"

All that day, they badgered me and persecuted me with questions. And in the end, when the sun was setting, they gave it up, and decided to put me to death.

Mine was a strange fate, in very truth; and now, when I look back upon that hour, I marvel that I took it all so calmly. For it was my destiny to sit by the camp-fire, whilst our evening meal of maize and manioc was cooking, and hear them discuss among themselves how I should be done to death.

Trust was all for rough-and-ready methods, in keeping with the blunt character of the man; Amos, for cold, deliberate torture; whereas Forsyth would bind me to a tree and leave me in the midst of that great wilderness to starve.

It was Mr. Forsyth's vote that was carried; and now that I knew the manner of my death, I was filled with cold fear, though till then I had borne my ordeal with a fortitude that surprised even myself.

And bound I was, then and there, to a stout palm-tree that stood by itself a

little distance from the margin of the forest. For rope they used a kind of creeper that was common in the woods, and not only was this as strong as a ship's hawser, but so hard and tied so tightly that it cut into my legs and arms like bands of steel.

[image]

"AND BOUND I WAS, THEN AND THERE, TO A STOUT PALM TREE, A LITTLE DISTANCE FROM THE MARGIN OF THE FOREST."

In such a manner was I doomed. For an hour or so I watched those three dread men, all so different, alike in nothing but their devilry, sitting together around the fire, talking in low voices, even pleasantly, as if to do murder were an every-day affair.

Then they lay down to sleep, and both Trust and Amos were soon snoring; whereas I was left, already athirst and hungry, to await the approach of a terrible and lingering death.

That night and those which followed will live always in my memory. I watched the moon rise, wondrous round and white and large, behind the rounded hill upon which stood Cahazaxa's Temple. The stars, which had been shining in their millions, faded in the moonshine, all save one bright planet in the sky above me. And there arose a mist, in which I thought there was something ghostly, upon the plain where the long grass stood like corn ready for the cutting. And behind me, as if striving to enfold me in an overpowering, stifling embrace, was the dark, deadly forest that cut me off from all and everything I loved.

Long before dawn, Amos Baverstock was stirring. I watched him kindle the embers of the camp-fire into a blaze, and, sitting with his crooked back, he looked just like a monkey. I noticed that even at that hour he was chewing one of his foul, black cigars, his stock of which was running low. Presently, he awakened Trust and Forsyth. They ate their breakfast in silence; never a word was said. And then they packed their knapsacks and set forward upon the march, in the gloaming, with never a word or a glance at me.

They marched in a bee-line upon the ruins of the ancient temple, and were soon lost both to sound and sight, for the plain lay even yet in the shadow of the night.

The dawn--the great heat at midday--the majesty and grandeur of the wilderness in the heart of which I was doomed and lost for ever--and, above all else, the grave-like silence of that place--it were better I made no attempt to describe these things than fail in the endeavour. I know no more than that my loneliness was overpowering. It was as if I was the only living atom, save the insects

and the butterflies that fluttered round about me, in all that world of gorgeous vegetation.

I could not move a fraction of an inch. I would gaze by the hour at the great stones of the ruins before me, small in the distance and yet plain to see in that clear atmosphere, and wonder what manner of men had lived there in bygone days--what had been their hopes, their interests, their mode of life. And then my thirst would consume me; my tongue would cleave to the roof of my mouth, and I would suck my lips to find them dry as bones.

One day of it had been more than I could bear; and that second night, I prayed that death might come speedily, for I saw that in death only would I find release from all my sufferings. But I lived on, like the Ancient Mariner himself; and on the third day, as on that tragic ship, there came a rain--a blessed rain from Heaven itself for me. Clouds appeared as if by magic, a dark canopy cast across the forest like a curtain; and the skies on a sudden opened and the rain came down in torrents.

I was wetted in an instant to the skin, but I cared nothing for that. I threw back my head with opened mouth, and the water streaming down my face was life and strength and hope to me.

And that night I no longer prayed for death; I prayed to the great God of Right and Justice for deliverance. And yet, how weak is human nature, how little is our faith! For before morning I was struggling like a madman to free myself from my bonds.

The more violently I fought for liberty, the greater pain I suffered; for the hard fibre cut into my flesh until I gave it up, and, overcome by sheer exhaustion, I fell asleep, held upright by my bonds.

I awoke to behold the half-light of approaching day. The plain of grass before me was lost in the mist which, in that weird place, came always at sunset and at dawn.

I looked about me as if I yet were dreaming. The giant forest trees had taken upon themselves the shape of ugly spectres. The tall grass swayed in the wind of the dawn with a soft, rustling sound that reminded me of my mother's silken dresses. I watched a lizard, the length of a foot-rule, run swiftly down the trunk of a tree and make off into the grass.

I endeavoured in vain to trace its passage, wondering whither the little creature was going so swiftly; and when I looked up I beheld to my astonishment--a man!

CHAPTER X--HOW THE WILD MEN CAME AND LOOKED AT ME

I have called him a man, and so he was, though, in very truth, at that time I had never seen his like. He was small in stature, little taller than myself; and there was something about him that was more animal than human. I cannot account for this, unless the explanation be found in the scared look upon his face, especially in the eyes--the eyes of a hunted beast.

He was not black, but light brown of skin, though there was so much dirt about him that I was not even sure of that. His hair was lank and long. All matted with mud, it fell about his ears. He wore no clothing, save the skin of some small, wild animal hung loosely round his waist; and he held in one hand a long bamboo rod, which I took to be a blow-pipe.

Now, I believed that this savage would kill me out of hand, defenceless as I was. But he stood staring at me for a long time, with his wild eyes and his mouth widely opened.

So, by degrees, my courage returned to me, and with it something of hope. I tried to think--and it is no simple matter to be reasonable when one is exhausted by starvation and tortured both in body and in mind.

It was manifest, in the first place, that I had no means of communicating with this man. I could neither speak to him nor sign, since I knew no word of any barbarous language, and my hands were bound fast to my sides. But I did the only thing I could do--I moved my mouth as if I were eating, hoping against hope that he would take my meaning: that I was starving and begged for food.

And the more I mouthed at him and made grimaces, the more he stared at me, and the more frightened did he seem. For the better part of five minutes I swear he never moved an inch, and then, quite suddenly, he took to his heels and

dived into the woods.

For a little time I could scarce credit it that he had left me to my fate. But when a full hour had passed, and I realised that it was possible that the wild man might not return, my sense of loneliness became even more oppressive than before, and to tell the truth I cried.

I am, in the evening of a long, adventurous life, at times of a reflective disposition, and I have considered often the strange complexities of human nature, for I have seen many men and places in my time. When I first beheld the savage, I was alarmed beyond measure that he would put the life out of me by means of his murderous-looking blow-pipe. I would, at that moment, gladly have had him on the other side of the world. And when he left me so suddenly, without sign or signal of either hostility or friendship, I felt no less dismayed.

I was so utterly alone in that great silence, in the shadow of those mute, majestic trees. Not even the wild inhabitants of that inhospitable region would come and have done with it and kill me.

And thus, indeed, I burst into tears, and cried as children cry. I think sheer weakness and the pain that I had suffered had much to do with it; and in any case it all seemed to me so pitiful and hopeless, for I was over-young to undergo such cruel privations.

I slept again until the evening, when I was awakened of a sudden by a strange noise like the chuckling of a hen.

I opened my eyes and looked upon the same wild man who had regarded me before. But this time he had brought three others with him--all four as like to one another as so many beans. And there they stood, in a row, immediately before me, one of them--as I have just expressed it--chuckling like a hen.

I could not for the life of me make out whether or not he was laughing. He might have been amused, amazed, or angered. There was no expression upon his face. The noise seemed to come from somewhere out of his throat. When I opened my eyes and looked at him, he ceased at once; so I am inclined to think he had behaved thus in order to awaken me.

I judged that the man I had seen earlier in the day had stood at a distance of about twenty paces from me; but now, made bolder by companionship, he had approached to within about twelve yards from the palm-tree to which I was bound. They were all armed with blowpipes, but they made no hostile movement; they just stood staring at me with their mad eyes, speechless and looking more afraid than I was.

All on a sudden, I was impelled to cry out. I shouted as a dog yelps when trodden on, asleep upon a mat.

"Give me food!" I cried. "Have pity on me! I am starving!"

And at that they vanished, all the four of them. They scattered like birds,

swiftly and in silence. At one moment, I beheld them; at the next, they were nowhere: they might have been spirited away.

They did not return that night, which was the most miserable of all. Hunger was now gnawing at my vitals. There was a foul taste in my mouth, and I felt so weak and lifeless that it was as if the slow beating of my heart shook my whole frame, making it hard for me to breathe. Also, I was again consumed by a raging thirst; but the worst of the whole matter was the seeming hopelessness of my situation; for now I verity believed that my end was drawing near.

Though often our endurance is strained to the utmost, and there are times when we are weighed down by grief and trouble, I know that the good God is merciful, that it is well to bear the ills we have so bravely as we may, in the firm conviction that faith and a stout heart to hope will conquer in the end.

The sun rose in that lone place upon my misery; and a little after, came the wild men again; and this time they were nine in number, for I counted them as they stepped in single file forth from the darkness of the woods.

They stood gazing at me as before; and now I was wise enough to hold my peace, though by then--if the truth be told--there was little strength within me; for, even as I looked at them, my eyelids dropped and my head nodded on my shoulders like that of a drunken man.

They came closer than ever, to within an arm's length of me, and one timidly extended an arm and touched me, and then drew back quickly as if he had burned his fingers.

[image]

"THEY CAME CLOSER THAN EVER, TO WITHIN AN ARM'S LENGTH OF ME."

I saw now that I had nothing to fear from them, that it was a keen struggle in their untutored minds as to whether fear or curiosity should win. I did my best to smile.

It was a senseless, mirthless smile, forced upon lips that were dry and burning and eyes grown dim throughout long hours of watching and despair; and yet--by the grace of Providence--it achieved its simple purpose.

For, forthwith, like a tribe of monkeys, they set to talking among themselves; and never had I heard such gibberish. They waved their hands, and made mouths and faces at one another that were astonishing to behold. They touched me repeatedly, fingering my tattered clothes; and one tugged so violently at the sleeve of my shirt, which had been torn to ribbons upon the thorn trees in the forest, that he pulled it off almost from the shoulder--and then began the monkey-house

again.

The very sight of my white skin, where it had not been tanned by the sun, set them jabbering for the space of half-an-hour; and all that time I kept my silence, fearing that, if I should speak, they would disperse like Sussex rooks at the sound of a farmer's gun.

I had read and heard of fierce savage black men, cannibals and the like, who regarded as their natural foes all of alien race, whom they put horribly to death. But these wild people were shy as antelopes; and though they might have been dangerous if handled wrongly, there was nothing to fear from them in the case of one placed at so great a disadvantage as myself.

I did nothing, then, but let them talk it out; and in the end, one of them took a bone knife with an edge like a saw, and cut through the fibre that bound me to the tree.

The others stood a little apart with their long blow-pipes, ready to riddle me with darts that I learned afterwards were poisoned. But no sooner were my hands freed than I pointed a finger straight down my opened mouth--a gesture which no one could mistake.

That set them talking once again; and when they were through with it, they took me with them back into the woods. In single file we wormed our way through the thick undergrowth of the forest, until at length we hit upon a footpath where they travelled fast and silently, these strange men of the woods. By then my strength was well-nigh exhausted. Both in mind and in body I was come to the end of my powers of endurance; and I could go no farther.

And so, thereupon, they carried me, taking it in turns among themselves to bear my weight, for they were not strong men, but thin of limb and short in stature.

We journeyed until nightfall, and then camped in the forest. They gave me food--roasted manioc and crushed bananas; and then I fell asleep.

At daybreak--though in those dark places we saw little of the sun, and there was small difference betwixt night and morning--we were on the march again, and about midday struck the course of a considerable river which we followed up-stream for a distance of many miles. From this valley we turned into that of a tributary, and reached our destination in the evening.

This was a small village of rude huts, inhabited--as I afterwards discovered--by the various members of a single family. I had walked many miles upon the second day, and found myself on arrival at the village as greatly fatigued as ever, suffering also from a stiffness in the joints, due to the cramped position I had been forced to assume when bound by the liana to the tree. So that after my simple meal that night, I again fell asleep, and slept, I verily believe, as I never did before or since. For not only was I spent and weary, but I had now the comfortable

assurance that these wild people would do me no bodily harm. For the time being, at least, I was safe.

CHAPTER XI--I BURN MY BOATS

You may scarce credit it when I say that I sojourned for many months with these savage, yet simple, people, and whilst with them received neither hurt nor insult, but passed my days in pleasant idleness in the heart of those awe-inspiring woods.

I have since described their ways and mode of living to a famous ethnologist, one whose business it was to study the sundry races of mankind; and he believed that I fell into the hands of a tribe of Caishana aborigines, one of the most primitive races in the world.

Of this, however, no one can be sure; for I learned little of their language, and of that remembered nothing. Besides, there are so many hordes of Indians and tribes in the valleys of the Upper Amazon, and of so few of these is anything definite known, even at the present day, that a question of such slight importance, for the time being, may remain unanswered.

It makes, in any case, no difference to my story. I do but state mere facts, leaving footnotes, queries and the like to scientists and students. For five months--as I can guess--I lived with this woodland people; and it pleases me to remember that, in return for their hospitality and kindness, I was able to render them some service. I taught them novel methods of catching the fish that abounded in the rivers, creeks and pools; and I gave them gladly the few belongings that I had upon me, even a large jack-knife, which the chief of the village received with unfeigned delight--for they were so uncivilised as to be altogether unacquainted with the use of iron.

On my side, I learned many things from them, becoming, for instance, skilled in the use of the blow-pipe--a very deadly weapon, since it made no more noise than a pop-gun, and the arrows were invariably dipped in the juice of a poisonous herb that grew plentifully in the forest.

I was much interested in the manufacture of these instruments. Many were of bamboo, but those of the better quality of a hard wood, from which the inside had been patiently scraped by means of a bone knife, until the surface was smooth as glass. Needless to say, to accomplish this, the shaft had to be split into two pieces, which were afterwards joined together. It took a skilled worker weeks to make a blow-pipe. A good specimen was always coveted, and he who possessed one was regarded as a person of importance. I was instructed also in the craft of making the darts or arrows; and this was an accomplishment that, more than once in the course of the next few months, stood me in good stead.

Of the people themselves, of their strange ways and customs, I might write a full chapter, were I so disposed. I have no reason to think that they varied greatly from the majority of the wilder tribes in the great forests of the Amazon. They were small in stature, short-lived, and very dirty. They went well-nigh naked, and many suffered from a particularly loathsome disease, the character of which I know not, save that it left their skin marked black in patches. I feared, at first, that this would prove contagious; but, either my nationality or else my cleanly habits--for I bathed daily in the river--preserved my health and personal appearance.

In regard to my bathing, I can relate a strange thing. It being the rainy season, the river was alive with alligators. I was at first considerably frightened of these horrid reptiles; but I soon discovered that all that was necessary was to beat the surface of the water violently with a stick in order to scare them away. Of course, it was needful to exercise a certain amount of discretion, to keep one's eyes open whilst in the water; and I do not say that there was no danger present. But the fact remains that the South American cayman, one of the most formidable-looking brutes in all the world, is a cowardly beast and by no means greatly to be feared.

If that be so, I have another story to tell concerning the snakes of that dark region; for these I never ceased to fear, and not without good cause. My boots had long since ceased to be of the least practical use, and I had presented them, not without ceremony, to the head man of the village where I stayed. I was obliged therefore to go bare of foot in the forest, like the natives themselves, and day and night I walked in constant peril of my life.

For the underwoods were populous with serpents of all kinds, many of which were venomous. They were usually to be found in the vicinity of water, and amongst them I cannot fail to mention the gigantic tree and water snakes, in whose deadly coils a full-grown man might well be crushed to death. More than once I set eyes upon these great, evil, stealthy monsters; and on each occasion my very blood ran cold. But I have yet to write of what I have called--for no better reason than that there is melodrama in the name--the Glade of Silent Death, where in part the tragedy of all my narrative attains some sort of a crisis--a crisis,

at least, for one of whom I dare say more than I would of any other: that he well deserved his fate.

Now, had I been content to eke out the remainder of my years with these untutored people, I should never have beheld the wonders of which I have to tell. I think I realised that if I continued to live as a savage, I must eventually myself become a savage, forgetting all I had ever learned of Christian civilisation. So I made up my mind to take my life into my hands, and set forth alone into the Wild.

Beyond doubt, my ulterior motive was to regain the confines of the civilised world, to hear again the voices of men speaking my own language--even the lazy Sussex twang. But I was moved firstly not so much by a desire for liberty, as by the spirit of adventure. For I had caught something of the rover from John Bannister, as I sat listening to his stories to the soft accompaniment of the wash of the English sea; and I would find out all I could concerning the quest of Amos Baverstock and the secret of the Greater Treasure of the Incas, which the more civilised of the Indians called the "Big Fish."

And so I asked the savages to guide me back to the place where they had found me, within sight of Cahazaxa's ruined temple. Though I never knew but a score of words of their language, I was now proficient in the art of conversing by signs and the drawing of pictures in the mud, as I was also something of a woodsman and--though but a few months older than when I had been kidnapped--no longer a boy, but the beginnings of a man, who was like to have a hard part to play. Life in the wilderness had made me self-reliant. To the wanderer in savage places peril comes naturally enough, and death itself is all in the work of the day.

But it was one thing to ask, and another to receive. The chief man of the community--for it was hardly a village--was all against the project. In the first place, he and the rest of them had grown to be fond of me--I was regarded as both a curiosity and something of an acquisition. Secondly, I soon discovered that they stood in fear and trembling of the ruins, which they firmly believed to be haunted.

Though they might have restrained me by force, we argued the matter out, and it came to a question of will-power--or obstinacy, if the word suit you better--and I had my way.

Accordingly, one morning I set forth into the forest, accompanied by a guide. I was dressed in the remnants of my shirt, tied like a kilt about my waist, and carried a ten-foot blow-pipe and a score of darts; and beyond these I had neither arms nor clothing. I was just a white savage in a great dark wilderness, with my life in my own hands and all Nature at war against me. And I doubt if I can even say that I was white, for I was now tanned almost to the colour of the wild men amongst whom I had lived.

In three days, by easy journeys, my companion and I came to the margin of the woods, to the great plain of waving grass, in the midst of which the Temple

of Cahazaxa stood upon a hill-top.

I begged of the man to come with me, to serve me as a servant, making vague promises of reward which I am sure he did not understand; and though, as I could see, the spirit was willing, the flesh was weak; for he fell down upon his knees before me, trembling in all his limbs, craving permission to return.

I could not be heartless. From the tribe I had never received anything but kindness. But permission to be gone was not all the simple fellow wanted; for, when he saw that I was determined to go alone upon my way to the ruins on the hill-top, he again fell down upon his knees, and implored me to return with him.

In so far as I could take his meaning, the old temple was infested by ghosts and evil spirits. Singular things for centuries had been known to happen among those grey, worn stones: weird singing had been heard and strange coloured lights had been seen of nights, and no man of the forest who had ever ventured to the hillock had as yet returned alive.

To speak true, these fables--though I believed no word of them--did but whet my appetite for action. I had a taste for danger. For the first time in my life, I was conscious of my own individuality. Man or boy, I was free. I had a part to play upon the stage of life, and the wide world was my scene. I, too, was upon the same quest as Amos: the hunt for the Greater Treasure. It was as if something within me urged me to go forward, like a knight-errant of old, placing my firm trust in Providence; and I now have little doubt that it was the voice of Destiny that spoke within me.

And so I bade farewell to the forest tribesman, whom I left upon the verge of tears, believing in his heart of hearts that I was as good as doomed; and with a light heart and my blow-pipe, I went my way across the plain, towards the hill upon which stood the ancient Temple of Cahazaxa, whilst the sun was sinking in the sky.

CHAPTER XII--THE PATH OF THE TIGER

It was near upon the time of sunset when I slowly climbed the hill. I could not take my eyes from the great stones before me, many of which must have been at least ten square yards in surface area, and cut so straight and square that, without cement or mortar, they fitted one against the other as nicely as a child's wooden bricks. I wondered how they had come there, by what means they had been transported and lifted into position; and I marvelled that an ancient people should have been masters of such science.

But it was not this alone that caused my footsteps to become slower and slower as I approached the ruin. Despite myself, I could not help remembering much that the wild man had said to me of ghosts and evil spirits.

In the dim evening light, wreathed in the mist that rose from the surrounding plain, those great pillars of cold, silent stone looked not to belong to this world of common things. Towering, as they did, above the tree-tops of the forest, they made me think of the enchanted palaces of which in childhood my mother had read to me from fairy tales. If there were ghosts anywhere in all the world, they were here--and I was sure of that.

This notion got the strongest hold of me; and presently, a cold sweat broke out upon my forehead, and I wished that I were back with the wild men in their woodland village. However, I had more pride than to retreat, and that at the eleventh hour; and I continued to go forward, though something after the manner of a condemned man towards the gallows.

As it grew darker I became more afraid. Night in those tropic latitudes comes suddenly; darkness falls like a curtain upon a stage; and when I had gained the outer pillars, which formed together an encircling colonnade, there was scarce light enough for me to see a distance of thirty yards.

Within the circumference of these outer pillars--which attained upon an average a height of about fifty feet--was a great roofless building with a floor of

flagstones, where the silence quite unnerved me. It was more oppressive than the silence of the forest, where I had always been conscious that one was surrounded by Life in a million forms: plants, insects, and animals--all at war that they might live.

But this place seemed dead, save for vast colonies of small red ants whose bite was poisonous; for I had not been there a full minute before I was bitten from head to foot, and there were painful weals all over me.

It was plain I could not sleep amid the ruins as I had intended. Not only would the ants torture me almost to distraction, but the place was uncanny, and I could now well understand how those ignorant woodlanders believed it to be haunted.

I was about to go, and had actually turned towards the main entrance, which I could see quite clearly in the light of the newly-risen stars, when a sound came to my ears that was so like a groan that I felt my blood run cold.

I stood transfixed, more frightened than bewildered. Looking about me on every side, straining my eyes in the semi-darkness, I could see nothing. I was convinced that there was no one in that vast chamber save myself and the red ants. And yet the groan came again, louder than before.

I tip-toed across the room, my heart throbbing like an engine. And like a frightened child, I hid myself in a corner; for I had no convictions any longer, and I wished only to be somewhere where I could not be seen.

Then a spider descended upon me from somewhere high up the wall. And you may laugh at me when I say that I sprang to my feet and dropped my blow-pipe and let out a cry that was very near a shriek. But you would never have laughed had you been placed as I was, seen that spider, and felt upon your shoulders his restless, furry legs. For this was no common spider that eats flies and gnats, but a bird-devouring brute, the size of a saucer; and this is no exaggeration when one takes into account the full extension of his legs.

As I fled, I picked it from off me with my hand, and threw it away; whereupon I found that it had covered my fingers with a disgusting and sticky saliva. I am only thankful that it had no time to bite me, for I believe the bite of these terrible insects has been known to prove fatal. They build webs of such strength and solidity that birds as large as sparrows are caught in the toils and killed; and I have heard it said that these monsters also ascend trees, drive hens from their nests and then devour their eggs.

However, this is no treatise upon Natural History. He who wishes to know more of this horrid creature may read of it in recognised works of science. For myself, to have felt once its quick, hairy legs upon my bare neck and shoulders is enough for many a day, and the thing may belong to any species and genus that it likes, so long as I never set eyes upon one again.

For I was thoroughly scared; I had become as jumpy as a bean on a hot plate. I trust that I am not by nature a coward; but the atmosphere of that ghostly, misty place, the mysterious groans that I had heard, which had seemed to come from nowhere, and the long-legged, furry spider, had all so played upon my nerves that I knew neither what I was doing nor what would happen next.

I had made, in any case, as much noise as a harlequinade. I had cried out at the top of my voice and had sent my wooden blow-pipe rattling to the ground. And then I stood motionless, breathless, waiting--as it seemed--for some new calamity.

This time it was no groan I heard, but a human voice calling, at first loudly, and then more softly, in a strange foreign tongue.

I listened, and I dared not move. The silence that followed endured for minutes, during which the seconds were punctuated by the violent beating of my heart. And, presently, I began to think. As I mastered my fears, I became capable of reasoning.

It was folly to consider ghosts. Such superstitions were well enough for untutored savages, wild men of the forests, but they would never do for Richard Treadgold, who had lived his years in Sussex--though, of a certainty, I had heard of more than one so-called haunted house between Beachy Head and Selsey Bill.

I was convinced that I had heard a human voice. I had been able even to distinguish words, howbeit in a language that I did not comprehend. And if that were so, it must follow that I was not the only human soul within that gloomy ruin.

I looked about me, and saw in the starlight my blow-pipe, lying on the floor. I picked it up, and placing a dart within the mouthpiece, began to explore the place, starting at the wide entrance and making a tour of the walls.

It was not long before I came upon a square hole in the ground, edged with shallow coping stones to keep out the water when the place was flooded by the rains. It reminded me of a hatchway on board a ship.

Below it was quite dark. I lay down upon the floor at full length with the idea of listening: for I was now sure that I was on the track of the secret of the place. But presently my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, and I saw before me a flight of narrow steps, leading downward--as it seemed--into the very bowels of the earth.

I had now mastered my fears. I was determined to be a fool no longer, but to conduct myself like the man I wished I were. I would have descended without a second's thought had it not been for two grave considerations: firstly, I had no means of striking a light; and secondly, the stairway was so narrow that I must leave behind my long Indian blow-pipe, the only means of self-defence I had.

I have set down already much by no means favourable to myself; and there-

fore I have the less hesitation in recording an incident which goes far to prove that there were moments when I was a worthy pupil and admirer of John Bannister himself. For I went down that black and shallow staircase, half naked as I was and quite unarmed, not knowing what would befall me at the end of it.

Half-way down, the staircase turned, when to my surprise I saw below me the dim reflection of a light. And presently I found myself in a long shallow chamber, where I stood bewildered.

In the centre of the room was a rough stone altar upon which burned an oil lamp of a quaint design and wrought in bronze. Of other such lamps, similar in all respects, I counted five, lying upon the stone flooring, each surrounded by its own pool of oil.

The whole place indeed was in great disorder. Curtains of finely woven hair had been wrenched from the walls and cast upon the ground. Benches and short-legged tables had been overturned, and in some cases broken. Here lay a sword, and there a spear, and here again a pistol, broken at the small of the butt. Nor was all this the worst of it, by any means; for immediately before me, lying in stiff, huddled attitudes--a pathetic and a tragic thing to see--were three stone-dead men, as sure as I first saw the light of day in Sussex.

Dead they were, for they neither moved nor even breathed. And when I sighed aloud at the wonder of it all, a fourth man whom I had not noticed, lying upon the floor at the other end of the room, struggled upon an elbow and cried out to me, and afterwards pointed a finger down his throat.

I was no such fool as to mistake his meaning. He wanted water to drink, and I looked about me to find it. At the foot of the altar was a pool of clear, crystal water, a spring that bubbled from out of the crust of the earth, the overflow being conducted to the far end of the chamber by means of a shallow, wooden trough. I found a drinking vessel which, to my amazement, was of gold; and this I filled in haste, and brought to the wounded man.

For wounded he was, a leg being broken at the thighbone, so that he could not move an inch without suffering the greatest pain. It was this pain I daresay, as much as loss of blood, which had thrown him in a fever; for his skin was burning to the touch.

Three times I filled the cup, and each time he emptied it; and as he drank, he thanked me with his eyes.

Then he lay back and rested, whilst I gazed upon that shambles; for a shambles it was--blood was everywhere.

I went to the dead men, to each in turn, to make sure that there was no spark of life in any. And this was the second time that I looked upon the cold face of death; for, sure enough, each one was dead. And they were shot; they had been killed by leaden bullets: one in the head, another in the heart, whereas the third,

poor wretch! had died in agony, with a great wound in his stomach.

But dead though they were, I could not regard them without noticing how different they were in features and in figure from the wild men of the woods.

The savages with whom I had sojourned for so long, for whose simple kindness I shall be ever grateful, were of a Mongolian cast of countenance: they had high cheek-bones, lips thinner than a negro's, and yet thick and loose, and their eyes were almond-shaped, inclining downwards to the nose. Also, their greatly receding foreheads and chins suggested that they belonged to one of the lower and least intelligent species of mankind.

But the three dead men, as well as he who was yet alive, had aquiline noses, thin lips, and rounded eyes. Also they were fully dressed in long tunics of some woven material, open at the throat, and girdled at the waist. They wore their hair long, but cut straight, level with the eyebrows; and above this fringe a broad metal band encircled the head above the ears.

I looked from them to the altar, and saw thereon a graven disc from which rays extended to the extremities of the stone. Beyond doubt this was meant to be the sun; and of a sudden I remembered that the inhabitants of Old Peru had been wont to worship the sun.

So these, perhaps, were those same Peruvian priests of whom Amos Baverstock had spoken, they who shared with John Bannister the secret of the Greater Treasure of the Incas.

And then the truth burst upon me as in a flash--I had struck the pathway traversed by the tiger. The death and destruction by which I was surrounded was the work of Amos Baverstock himself.

I picked up the broken pistol, looked at it in the lamplight, and knew straightway that I had guessed aright. For I recognised it at once. It had belonged to Joshua Trust. It was the same pistol I had seen often in his hands, the one with which he had fired at me upon the Littlehampton road. And if I had had any doubts upon the matter, they would have been dispelled at once; for there were the man's initials, "J.T.," carved with his sailor's jack-knife on the wood.

I just let the broken pistol fall to the ground at my feet; and at the noise, the wounded man, to whom I had given water, struggled again upon an elbow, and spoke to me--*in English.*

CHAPTER XIII--THE STORY OF ATUPO

"Friend?" said he; and though he pronounced the word in the strangest fashion, I at once took his meaning.

I assured him of my good intentions, that I was no friend of those who had committed so dastardly an outrage. And at that, though in the greatest pain--as I could see--he smiled and thanked me.

I will not repeat word for word the childish broken English that he talked. He knew nouns enough to express his meaning, but this was all of our language that he had, and for verbs he was obliged to fall back upon grimaces and gesticulations. These, however, were so forcible and graphic that I was never at a loss to understand him: and during the six weeks that this man and I lived together in the ruins, whilst his broken leg was mending, he came to speak quite fluently in my language, whereas--to my shame, be it confessed--I learned not a dozen words of his.

I asked him how he had picked up his English; and since I had already guessed his answer, the familiar sound of that fond name was no less pleasant in my ears.

"John Bannister," said he; and then asked me eagerly where Bannister now was.

I shook my head, telling him as simply and as briefly as I could the whole of my adventures, from the time when I was kidnapped a few miles from my home beyond the seas to the day when I took my departure from the habitations of the wild men of the woods.

His story I got from him by degrees, after I had tended to his wounds. I had no knowledge of surgery, but I knew that a broken leg must be made fast to a splint; and, borrowing a knife, I returned that very evening to the forest, and cut a straight branch from a tree, as well as a long coil of liana, which I wound about my shoulders like a garden-hose.

I peeled the bark from two sides of the branch to make it as smooth as possible, and then bound it tightly to the poor man's leg by means of the liana. I bathed his wound daily with the clean water from the spring within the vault; and in a few days the blood ceased to flow and the wound--a rough, ugly rent from a leaden bullet--began to heal.

There was a plentiful supply of food within the chamber--bananas, dried berries, and manioc; and together we lived, this man and I, in uneventful idleness, he flat upon his back on a bed of rushes, I attending to his daily wants.

He claimed direct descent from the *incas* of Old Peru. He told me much that I already knew: that in the great land which had been discovered by Pizarro there had been two races, the common Peruvians and those of *inca* stock. The latter was the nobility of the land, being of royal blood; and it was they who had held the important offices of state and formed the priesthood.

Centuries ago, upon the fall of Cuzco, Cahazaxa, one of the greatest nobles in the kingdom, escorted by an army of priests and soldiers, conveyed the Greater Treasure across the mountains, and hid it in the forest that extends across the whole valley of the Upper Amazon and its tributaries. The Spaniards got wind of this, and some years afterwards, in the year 1541, an expedition led by the redoubtable Orellano, a lieutenant of Gonzalo Pizarro, crossed the eastern chain of the Andes in search of El Dorado, or that country which was then but vaguely known as the Land of the Gilded King.

This "Gilded King" was Cahazaxa himself, who, at the time of Orellano's famed expedition, had been for some months dead. But the little civilised colony that he had established in the wilderness survived, and continued to survive until the middle of the last century, when I myself beheld the last of it.

Now, in the narration of historical and other facts, I have the greatest regard for a certain principle, established by the Greeks: the habit of reserving for its proper place each item of information, whether it be of primary or secondary importance. On that account, I ask you, therefore, for the space of a chapter or so, to bear in mind the famous name of Orellano and his search for the Land of the Gilded King--an affair to which I must soon refer again. I set down now only that which the *inca* himself told me, together with such historical facts as were known to me at the time.

Cahazaxa was dead; and he was buried in a cavern, high amidst the cloud-wrapped mountains, where his soul might rest in peace the nearer to the God he worshipped--the life-giving and almighty Sun, who, as he held, in the very dawn of the ages had sent Manco Copac and Mama Oello Huaco to earth, to make the Incas of Peru glorious and great.

Orellano, the Spaniard, failed to find the Treasure. Undergoing the most terrible privations, he and his gallant followers pierced the forest, and, making one of

the most remarkable journeys in the whole history of exploration, descended into the main stream of the great River of Mystery--as I call the Amazon--and, finally, after eight months of hardship and of peril, came within sight of the Atlantic.

The courage of these men is much to be commended. The modern explorer has at his service breech-loading magazine rifles, invaluable geographical and scientific knowledge, and an adequate supply of suitable food and drugs. But these bold Spaniards of the sixteenth century had nothing, save their own stout hearts and strong Toledo blades. Enough has been written concerning their greed, their bigotry and cruelty. The story might be told again and again of their indomitable bravery. Orellano knew not whither he was going. When he decided to shoot the rapids, taking his life in his hands, he might as well have thrown dice with Death. How can we do aught but honour the land that has produced such sons as Cortez and Pizarro, Orellano, Vasco Nunez, and Alonzo de Ojeda?

But, for the present, we are more concerned with Cahazaxa, a hero no less than these doughty Spaniards. He and his followers hid themselves in the wilderness, and there both Orellano and Pizarro himself failed to find them; and in this there is little to wonder at, when we consider the immensity of the great Forest of the Amazon.

They built for themselves a massive temple after the fashion of the sacred palaces of Quito and Cuzco, dedicated to the Sun; and in course of time they constructed roads and bridges across the rivers, founding for themselves a colony where the civilisation of the *incas* lived for a century or more after their own country across the mountains had fallen under the dominion of the hated Spaniard.

This was the land of the Gilded King, the country of El Dorado. Word of its existence came to Quito, from the lips of savage aborigines prone naturally to exaggeration; but, though party after party of avaricious, bold adventurers crossed the mountains, the Peruvian settlement remained undisturbed. The secret of the "Big Fish" was never discovered either by the Spaniards or the Portuguese, who in the next century came up the great river from the east, traversing the country that is now called Brazil.

I did not learn all this from the *inca* priest himself; but so much of it as he could not tell me I knew already from what I had read of those golden days when the New World was a land of Mystery and Romance, and men thought and talked of doubloons instead of dollars.

It is true, I never beheld with my own eyes the actual civilisation of ancient Peru as it had existed in Cahazaxa's time, because, many years before, it had died a natural death. The Peruvians, born and bred upon the western sea-board or the great tablelands beyond the Andes, were not able to survive in the humid atmosphere of the tropic forest. In course of time, a colony of several thousands, whom Cahazaxa had led across the mountains, had dwindled to a community of

a few families of the old *inca* stock, the majority of whom served as priests of the Sun in the great ruined temple, constructed by their forefathers, which they were not able to keep in repair.

It was these men, descended in a direct line from the *incas* whom the Spanish conquerors had driven forth from Cuzco and Quito, who guarded the secret of the Greater Treasure. It was they who were treacherously attacked and foully done to death by Amos Baverstock. And I will now relate the full story of that brutal enterprise as I got it from the lips of the man whom I befriended.

Baverstock, with his three companions, had come to the temple some weeks before, on the day they had tied me to the tree and left me to starve to death.

The priests had been greatly alarmed at the sight of the intruder, whom they recognised at once. They remembered the time when Baverstock and Trust had attacked the temple, and they had been obliged to fight for their lives, and would then and there have been slaughtered, had it not been for John Bannister, who placed himself at their head and drove Amos forth.

But Bannister was no longer with them to fortify them with his courage, to preside at their councils, and to deal death to their enemies with his swift, unerring aim. And they were terrified at the very sight of Amos, as I myself had been when I first set eyes on the man upon the Sussex shore.

He demanded to know where the Greater Treasure was hidden. He reminded them that they had lied to him once, and held forth threats that made their blood run cold. If they lied to him again, he would return, and no man of them would live to fool Amos Baverstock a third time.

Now, they dared not speak the truth, for they were sworn to secrecy before the Sun, which they believed to be the Creator of the Universe; and yet, they dared not lie, for they knew Amos would be as good, or as evil, as his word.

So, swearing upon all things they looked upon as holy, they set Amos and his friends upon the right road to the "Big Fish." They told him to follow a certain track across the grassland, until he came to a range of down-like, grass-clad hills. Thence, to the west, lay a wood in mid-valley, and in a glade in this wood the Treasure was buried, the place being marked by a great red stone, standing forth in the form of a monster fish in the act of leaping from the water. Here, clearly, was the origin of the legend, current among the natives even to this day, of the Big and Little Fishes. And when I heard the story as it was told me by the *inca* priest, I confess I was conscious that my heart beat more rapidly and the warm blood of my youth was stirred within me.

But Amos Baverstock cared nothing for legend. He lived only to lay hands upon a horde of untold gold; and that same day he left the Temple of Cahazaxa and set forth to the west upon his treasure hunt.

And when he was gone, the priests held conference, demanding of Atupo

why he had told their enemy so much of their cherished secret--for Atupo was the name of the surviving priest with whom I talked among the temple ruins. For he it was who devised the scheme whereby he hoped both to save the lives of his friends and to preserve the Greater Treasure; and now that all had failed so dreadfully, to the great pain he suffered from his wound was added anguish and remorse, inasmuch as the blame was his.

He advised them to arm themselves, and took with him ten of the best archers of the little community, ordering them to steep the heads of their arrows in the juice of the venomous weed that grows in the forest--which is nothing more or less than strychnine, one of the most virulent of poisons.

Atupo, with these ten men, who were all young and fleet of foot, traversed the grassland by a series of forced marches by night, so that they outdistanced Amos and reached first the Wood of the Red Fish--for so, with a little latitude, may be translated the old Peruvian name. And there they laid an ambush by a pathway along which Amos, and those with him, would be obliged to pass, and each archer was instructed to pick out his man. Four were detailed to shoot at Amos, three at Trust, and two each at Forsyth and the Spaniard, Vasco.

Now, it seems not possible that a plan so well thought out could fail; and yet, it would seem also that here, at least, the devil helped his own.

For Mr. Forsyth, and not Amos, came first to the ambuscade; and of the two arrows, one struck a silver tobacco tin that he chanced to be carrying that day in the pocket over his heart, and the other sheared off his right ear as cleanly as a tailor snips his cloth with a pair of scissors. And in the fraction of a second, Forsyth, all bleeding from the head, had his revolver from its holster, and had shot down two of the priests.

Thus was the alarm given to Amos and those who followed him; and there was no question of a surprise. It came to a hand-to-hand affair, and then a running fight amid the woodland undergrowth, in which the bow and arrow had but a small chance against modern firearms. One by one, the priests were dropped in their tracks, and only Atupo himself escaped with life, though sorely wounded in the leg.

He got clear of the wood, and lay hidden, day after day, in the long grass of the plain, journeying by night towards the forest, endeavouring to reach the ruined Temple of Cahazaxa. Though his leg was not then broken, he could do no more than crawl a few miles at a time, so that he was long weeks upon the road.

And during all these days, Amos beat the wood from west to east, from south to north, and failing to find the "Red Fish," believed that he had again been sent upon a wild-goose chase; and the more firm was he in this conviction since there had been such treachery on the part of the *inca* priests.

I heard afterwards that his wrath was like that of a madman; he stamped

and raved, and swore that he would return to the temple and put every living soul to death. And yet, they could not move a yard upon their backward journey, until Forsyth's life was out of danger.

Without doubt, Mr. Gilbert Forsyth would have died in torture, there amid the foothills of the distant Andes, had it not been for his own promptitude and courage. For no sooner did he feel the poison working inward from the wound where the arrow had cut off an ear, than he thrust the blade of a hunting-knife into a glowing charcoal camp-fire, and himself placed the red-hot steel upon the lacerated flesh.

And though he fainted at the time, and fell afterwards into a raging fever, this action saved, perhaps, his life. In the wilderness, rough-and-ready methods are often unavoidable; only he who is bold and strong can survive, whilst the weakling falls by the way. That Forsyth, despite his affectations and his London ways, was a man of action who could face pain as well as danger, this deed of his was in itself enough to prove. With his own hand he burned the poison from his flesh.

For all that, he lingered for many days betwixt life and death; and it was the delay caused thereby that gave Atupo time to regain the temple.

He had intended to give warning to his brother priests, and for this purpose he arrived none too soon. Many were so alarmed at the news of the disaster that they departed instantly, seeking shelter in the forest and taking with them their wives and families. But three remained, to collect the sacred lamps and vessels that were within the Temple, meaning to set forth the following day. And these were caught at midnight by Amos, who turned assassin then and there; for it was he who killed them with his own hands, in the great vault beneath the ruins.

Atupo, too, he shot, though the man lay wounded on the ground, exhausted after the effort of his long journey across the grassland, and left him there for dead, his already wounded leg fractured a few inches below the hip.

All this I learned from the man himself, while I nursed him under the Temple--all save the story of the fortitude of Mr. Forsyth, of which I heard afterwards, as in due time I will tell.

CHAPTER XIV--THE GLADE OF SILENT DEATH

When I had heard the story of Atupo, it seemed to me that I knew all there was to know concerning the "Big Fish." And a feeling of restlessness at once possessed me; I desired to be up and doing, to venture myself across the grassland, to find the Wood of the Red Fish, for which the bold Spaniards of a bygone century had searched so often and in vain.

But I stood in the debt of charity and honour, and in consequence I felt for all the world like a kennelled dog that tugs barking on his chain. For some weeks, at least, I must stay by the side of the wounded man, whom I could now call my friend. And if those days were something idle, we were by no means out of danger; for any day Amos Baverstock might return when, of a certainty, it would go ill with Atupo and myself.

I found ample time throughout this period of my adventuring to explore the neighbourhood of the Temple, and many things I found of the greatest interest. About a mile distant from the ruins was the village where the Peruvians had lived, and here also was a great convent built of stone and thatched with straw, after the fashion of the palaces in ancient Quito. In this convent--so Atupo told me--had dwelt some score of nuns, vestal virgins, whose lives were dedicated to the Sun, just as there had been such maidens in the service of Jupiter and Mars in the great temples of Rome; for in many respects did the ancient Peruvians resemble the Romans: they were great builders of roads, bridges, and forts; every man must serve the state; and the Inca, on returning from his victories, would march in public triumph through the chief city of the land.

I found both the village and the convent quite deserted; for--as I have said--on hearing of the approach of Amos and his friends, the Peruvians had fled into the forest, preferring to run the risk of death at the hands of the wild men with their poisoned arrows, or from starvation in the midst of that unending wilderness, to finding themselves once again face to face with that implacable and murderous

villain who had sworn to put them all--woman, man, and child--relentlessly to death.

I learned afterwards that few of these poor fugitives survived; for Amos burned their homes to the ground and left not one stone upon another; and this he did in wrath and malice, since it served him no better purpose than to waste his time, and that at a moment when his fate was jeopardised and he himself stood betwixt life and death.

When I saw the convent and the village, the place was just as the inhabitants had left it; and in such haste had they departed that I even found cooking-pots containing stews, all cold and jellified, standing in the ashes of burnt-out fires. The only sign of life to be seen was a number of llamas, long-necked Peruvian sheep, grazing in the shadow of the convent walls.

And now I am arrived at that part of my story when I came within an ace of losing life itself, and was only delivered at the eleventh hour by what was little short of the miraculous. For, in course of time, Atupo was healed of his wound, and well able, with the help of a staff, to hobble about the temple. It was then that I told him of my plans, of how I longed to journey to the Wood of the Red Fish, if for nothing else than to gaze upon the treasure of the Incas.

He listened patiently to all I had to say, and then sighed deeply.

"As you will," said he. "Of what use now is all this gold? My brother priests are slain, my people are scattered broadcast; the children of Cahazaxa are no more. Find your way, if you will, to the 'Big Fish.' I have told you where it lies. Feast your eyes upon the wealth that was once the glory of Peru. The race of the Incas is ended; the blood of kings is cold; even our gods are dead."

I knew that he referred to certain images in the Temple which Amos had wantonly destroyed; and I was sorry for the man.

"You will come with me?" I asked.

But he shook his head.

"That is not possible," he answered. "And even were it so, there would be naught to gain. I am already too greatly in your debt, and were I to accompany you, I should be a hindrance and a danger."

I could not deny the truth of this, though I was loth to leave him, weak and crippled as he was. And yet, it was manifest that we could not remain for an indefinite time within the Temple: sooner or later, our provisions would run out, and, any day, Amos might return.

"Where will you go?" I asked.

He pointed towards the forest.

"Thither," said he; and there was a certain nobility in his manner when he added, "to find my own people; for find them I will, in this world or beyond the grave. Death holds no fears for the sons of Cahazaxa."

And so, some days afterwards, we parted: he, to the east, to the dark, spreading forest; I, to the west, across the grassland, upon my treasure quest, to search for the Wood of the Ked Fish and the lost Treasure of Kings.

I set forth upon my great adventure all naked like a savage, save for a loincloth of woven hair that Atupo, the priest, had given me. I was armed with my long Indian blow-pipe and a quiverful of darts. And I went into that strange, romantic land alone, without guide, compass or companion, never knowing at night-time, when I lay down to sleep, what calamity or fortune the morrow held in store for me. And this, I stand convinced even to this day, when my hairs are white and shoulders bowed, is the only way to live and to die.

For three days I traversed a great plain of rolling, down-like country, that reminded me somewhat of my own dear Sussex, save that the grass was coarse and longer. Some miles before me was a high ridge that stood forth at sunset like a battlement across the sky; and I knew that I must gain the crest of this before I could find the Wood of the Red Fish.

Presently, however, I found my progress impeded by a river that had worked its way throughout the centuries deep into the rock, so that it flowed between almost perpendicular cliffs.

I could neither see nor devise any manner of crossing. I sat down upon the edge of the cañon and ate some of the manioc I had brought with me from the temple. I remembered that both Amos and Atupo had somehow crossed the river; and this thought was not a little encouraging. Across the grassland I had followed no track or pathway, so that when I had found a means of crossing the cañon, I must know that I was once again upon the right road to the wood that I was seeking.

That night, in full moonshine, I worked up-stream for many miles upon the left bank of the ravine. I slept for a few hours, and at daybreak continued my journey, and a little after, came quite suddenly upon one of the most wondrous things that I have ever seen.

For there before me was a great and magnificent suspension bridge, spanning the width of the ravine--a distance, I should say, of thirty or forty yards. The cables of this bridge were made of the twisted fibre of maguey, a kind of osier, and were at least three feet in diameter. It was hard to realise that the whole structure stood there more or less as it had been erected, centuries before; but it seemed to me an even more wonderful thing that, in the midst of such a desolate and barren region, I should so suddenly have come across evidence of the greatest skill in engineering. I could scarce believe that I had passed through an almost impenetrable tropical forest to traverse a ravine as easily as I might have walked along the familiar dyke from Sidlesham to Pagham.

The bridge itself was no more than a footbridge, but it served its purpose

well enough; and, crossing over, I hit almost at once upon a pathway through the grass. This I lost at nightfall, but I continued on my way in the moonlight, working upward upon a slope that rapidly became steeper.

In the small hours of the morning, sheer fatigue brought me to a halt by the side of a spring of clear water, bubbling forth from the earth. And here I drank and ate, breathing deeply of the cool fresh air of the uplands, which was like strong wine to me after the humid atmosphere of the forest; so that I slumbered as I had not slept for months, since I had left my home in Sussex, nor did I awaken until the morning sun was high.

I saw that I had but a little way to go to reach the crestline of the hills--an hour's climb would do it; and I set forward gleefully, in high anticipation, wondering what lay beyond the watershed, and whether I would sight the Wood of the Red Fish, but little dreaming what would there befall me.

I reached the summit hot and out of breath; and then I stood stock still, breathless in wonderment and all amazed.

I cast not one glance towards the wide valley at my feet. I stood staring before me, like one dumbfounded, at the gorgeous panorama I beheld. For yonder, more than a hundred miles away, but clear in the morning sun at the back of me, stood the mighty and majestic Andes. Snow-crowned they were, rugged as a wild sea, and yet bold and still and massive as the thrones of gods. And I, who had never seen such mountains in my life, was awed and wonder-struck; and I realised, I am sure, the glory of the works of God.

I gazed--it may have been, for an hour, sitting cross-legged, naked as the wild men of the woods, with my blow-pipe on my knees--at that great range of mountains that spans near half the world, extending almost from pole to pole. And then I looked down into the valley, and the thought that I was now within a day's march of my goal banished from my mind all loftier thoughts, and I found myself wondering whether it was I who was to find, at last, the lost land of El Dorado.

For the valley was cut up into marshland, plains and hillocks, in and out of which a river wandered, now and again to open out into a lake or swamp, in which there were little tree-clad islands. But to the north was a wood, diamond-shaped, flanked to the east by a spur of the hills, and to the west by a morass where I could see the water glittering in the sunlight.

On the foothills across the valley was a considerable forest, extending as far as the eye could reach; but I could not doubt that the wood in mid-valley, to the right of me, being so like the description which Atupo, the priest, had given me, was the Wood of the Red Fish.

And then and there I set forward running, for I was young and hot-headed, and had not yet learned that time is but the slave of man, and that patience and

caution are of more worth than eager haste.

So I came, that evening, hot and thirsty to the wood, and then, in the darkness of the trees, whilst the sun was setting, I stood like a fool, irresolute and wearied, not knowing what next that I should do.

I was hungry as well, for I had eaten all the food I had carried with me from the temple, and saw now that I must trust to my blow-pipe for sustenance, and kill what came my way that might be fit to eat. Fortunately, during my sojourn with the wild men, I had learned something of Indian woodcraft; and setting about my business without further loss of time, I searched at random in the wood until I found a glade where there was a pool of water, and here I crouched under cover, lying motionless, with my blow-pipe ready for whatsoever animal might come down to the pool to drink whilst the evening light still lasted.

This place--though I then knew it not--was the Glade of Silent Death; and I have given it that name for a certain reason, which was in very truth a tragedy.

There came, as I waited, to the woodland pool a small kind of deer; and he waded knee-deep into the water that he might drink. As he did so, I thought that I perceived some movement on the surface, as it might have been a rat swimming swiftly a distance of a few yards. I took no heed of it at the time, my attention being taken up with my blow-pipe, that I might strike the deer stone-dead, beneath the point of the left shoulder, placing my arrow deep in the poor beast's heart.

I was about to shoot, when suddenly he kicked, and then endeavoured with a jerk to throw himself backward on his haunches. To my astonishment I observed that he was held fast by the nose, which might have been gripped in a vice, and that in spite of all his efforts he was being dragged steadily and slowly deeper into the pool.

It was as if I were smitten by a cold rush of ice, when the truth was made quite plain to me. It was that half-light of evening, which is neither day nor night, when the early moon vies with the dying sunlight. And I saw the monster writhing coils of a great serpent rise dripping from the water and enfold the broken stump of a tree.

I knew now that the deer was doomed; and so illogical is human nature that I experienced two emotions: terror of the reptile and pity for the beast that but a moment since I myself would have gladly slain for food.

No doubt the anaconda stood in need of nourishment as much as I, and wanted more of it, to boot. But snakes were accursed things since Eden, and this vile, stealthy giant more so than most, because of his great bulk and strength. I know now that he was nearer thirty than twenty feet in length, and that his girth about the middle was greater than that of my own chest, though I was a strong lad for my years.

And now that he had lashed himself to the tree-stump, the deer was lost.

Its head was already under water, so that in a few moments the animal must be drowned. It would then be crushed to a pulp in the powerful, band-like coils of the constrictor, covered all over with a loathsome saliva, to be swallowed slowly and gradually, and yet in bulk.

I could see the head of the snake, for the light was fading and the deer in its death struggle lashed the water into foam. But I could see the great glistening body of the reptile but a few yards away from me, and into the thickest part of this I drove one of the darts from my Indian blow-pipe, and as I did so, shuddered, more revolted than afraid.

The effect was instantaneous and surprising. My dart must have struck the snake in the region of the spinal cord, for the great length of the brute curled backward like the lash of a whip; and the deer, released from those murderous coils, scrambled from the water, panting and exhausted, with its red tongue hanging from its mouth.

And then the animal fell dead upon the ground, but a few feet from where I lay. I could feel my own heart beating within me like a sledge-hammer. For some minutes I gazed at the pool that rocked and swelled like a sea in miniature. There came ripples, one after the other, to the water's edge, where they lipped and splashed like little waves. And then, at last, all was still--still as glass in the moonlight. But I knew that the great snake was somewhere near me, and my sole desire was to escape from that dread, silent place, and that as quickly as I might. And yet, the primal instinct of mankind was strong within me, the love of life that is sustained by food; and as I drew back into the thickets of the underwoods, I dragged with me by the horns the lifeless body of the deer.

CHAPTER XV--HOW I BEHELD A MIRACLE

I found a place where I could rest and eat; and there I cut steaks from the deer with a quaint knife which had been given me by Atupo--for I now prided myself on being a hunter of experience--and made a fire of dried sticks and leaves.

The heat of the night was excessive, and I had little need of the warmth; but I was glad of the light of the flames, for I was still much shaken by my adventure with the great constrictor, and had imagined vague, savage enemies amid the dark thickets that hedged me in.

It will be noted that I have referred to the snake as a "constrictor"; but, from this, it must not be thought that the monster was a boa. The family of the boas, known scientifically as the *boidae*, contains many species which are to be found in all parts of the world: the diamond snake of Australia, the rock python of Natal, the Indian python, and the great South American genera--the anaconda and the true boa-constrictor.

All these reptiles are remarkable for the partial development of hinder limbs, proving conclusively that the snakes and lizards are nearly related to one another. These rudimentary limbs, however, are not visible in the living animals, being covered by the skin, but are quite evident in their skeletons. It is also of interest to remember that birds have evolved from reptiles, the forelegs having been converted into wings.

All the constrictors kill their prey by crushing, and none have poison-fangs; and though these species are, with one or two exceptions, the largest snakes in the world, they move, whether in the water or among the tree-tops, in absolute silence. That which I myself attacked was undoubtedly an anaconda; and I know this for sure, because, though the light was bad, I distinctly saw two rows of great, dark spots upon his back, and not a black chain, which is the distinguishing mark of the boa-constrictor. Besides, the anaconda is essentially a water-snake, whereas the boa, though he will take readily to water, lives as a rule among the trees.

Well, though I shudder when I think of the brute, I had no real cause at the time to abuse him, for I might not have slain the deer with my blow-pipe, and I was now supplied with food so long as the meat would keep in that steaming hothouse of a jungle.

I did not sleep so well that night, weary though I was. I think I was not so much afraid as oppressed by an almost overwhelming sense of loneliness.

Quite suddenly I realised, as I sat by my camp-fire, chewing the venison steaks--which were inordinately tough--that I was utterly alone. For weeks I had enjoyed the company of Atupo, and before that of the wild men; and even Amos and his companions, my sworn enemies, had human voices to which I had been wont to listen of an evening by the fire when the day's march was ended. But here was I indeed, alone in the dark wilderness, and I could not but recognise that the woods around me were alive, that life in a thousand shapes and forms was all about me, unseen, but not unheard.

For I listened to strange and little noises everywhere--upon the ground, in the thick undergrowth, among the great trees that towered above me. My strained

ears heard, perhaps, sounds that never were; but I know that great moths came fluttering to my fire, and leaves moved where insects crept and crawled, and now and again some kind of cricket would begin to sing, only to cease quite suddenly, I should think, on the approach of danger.

They all lived, thought I, on sufferance, by the grace of the great God who made them all, and me as well. For I was one with them, even these little living things of the endless wilderness, encompassed by so many dangers, at the mercy of the great forces of Nature that might at any moment rise against us and stamp out our little lives.

And I thought, too, of Amos. In the silence and the darkness, my old dread of the man returned; and I asked myself where was he all these months, and what were he and his companions doing?

I knew that, like myself, he had been searching for the Treasure in this same Wood of the Red Fish; but I could not think that he was still in the neighbourhood. At the time, of course, I knew nothing of Forsyth's wound, which had delayed Baverstock so long; and when I afterwards came to work the matter out, I arrived at the conclusion that Amos must have left the wood on the very night when I encountered the anaconda. He then returned to the temple, and, finding both the ruins and the village quite deserted, gave unholy vent to his wrath by burning everything that fire could touch. He then came back upon his own tracks, by way of the suspension bridge, drawn to the Red Fish like steel to a magnet, for the man's soul itself was magnetised by gold.

And all this time was I searching in the wood. For ten days I roamed here and there, living upon wild fruits and berries, and the birds I slew with my blow-pipe. Atupo had given me certain vague directions, which had seemed clear enough to me at the time. However, the man's knowledge of our language was but imperfect, and the wood itself a veritable maze, a labyrinth of shallow, twisting tunnels, from which the sunlight was eternally shut out.

I wandered daily, lost in very truth, and came often to the Glade of Silent Death, near which place I would never venture to sleep for fear of the great serpent that I knew lay somewhere in the pool.

On the tenth night of my wanderings, I received something in the nature of a shock. I had made my camp-fire somewhat earlier than was my wont, and a small, gay-feathered bird that I had shot and plucked was roasting over the red-hot charcoal, when, of a sudden, a shot from a rifle rang out in the woods not far from where I was.

I sprang to my feet, in a high state of alarm, and kicked the fire broadcast, for I had gone barefooted for so long that the soles of my feet were like leather. And even as I did so, several other shots were fired in quick succession.

I ate my bird half cooked--for I was hungry--and sat in the darkness for hour

upon hour, certain that Amos himself was near at hand, and filled with apprehension.

I had a good mind that night to give up my quest, to return to the grassland, where I could breathe the open air and feel the warmth of Heaven's sun upon me, hoping that thence I might somehow find my way back to the abodes of civilised men. I was sick at heart for want of the sound of a human voice and the sight of those I loved.

What would be my fate in that dark wilderness, armed only with my blowpipe, if I should fall into the hands of men like Amos Baverstock and Trust? In my thinking, the shots that I had heard could have been fired by no one else. And yet, of my own free will, for three days longer I delayed within the wood; and now, when I can look back upon those wild, adventurous days, I am devoutly thankful that I did.

My own audacity can be explained, I think, by the fact that I was now three parts a savage. I was, as one might say, on friendly terms with danger. Peril and I had sojourned together for so long that I had come to regard even grim Death itself as no such weighty matter. Life was no more to me than to the little wild things that I daily slew for food. And so, for three days, I continued my searching in the jungle, howbeit acting more cautiously than before, making little noise and pausing frequently to listen.

And then, by chance, I made a great discovery. At the time, in very truth, I did believe that I beheld the manifestation of a miracle; and I warrant that he that reads this will think the same, when I have set down the facts as they occurred.

I came, late of an afternoon, upon an open place where there were rocks among the trees; and between these rocks the ground was soft, the soil quite black, being composed of the decayed vegetation of many tropic seasons. Here I found footmarks of living men, and, moreover, men who were no strangers to leather boots.

That more than one of them had visited this very place, I was well convinced, since the footmarks bore evidence of at least two pairs of boots--one with great hobnails, and the other without. I never doubted that I had hit upon the trail of Amos and his friends; and I had--as I thought--sure proof of this, a little after, when I came upon an empty cartridge-case.

The most of us believe that we have latent abilities, little suspected by our friends, that we are never called upon to use. I have heard it said that the great Duke of Wellington thought little of himself as soldier, but far too much of his reputation as a politician. And on this occasion it was something pleasing to my vanity to play the part of a detective, though I knew not the very alphabet of the business. I examined the footmarks, and made quite sure that I had found the trail of Joshua Trust, who wore, I knew, a pair of heavy boots with hobnails; and the

brass cartridge-case--which I have kept to this day as a memento--had, I surmised, once been the property of Amos. So I went down on hands and knees, groping in the half-light of the woods to see what else I could discover. And whilst thus employed, I hit upon the miracle that all but cost me life itself.

I found a place beneath the rocks where there was a smooth stone slab, fashioned plainly by the hand of man. And this rocked gently when I pressed my weight upon it, which suggested that it had been moved quite recently.

In any case, both the shape and the size of the thing bewildered me, for it was all the world like a tombstone. And one would not think to find tombstones in the tropic wilderness beneath the Andes.

I found the stone quite easy to lift, for it was thin as a plank, and had a hole in the middle, through which I could place a hand. And then I stood gazing into the cavity below.

And as I gazed, I gasped. I drew back a little, with a quick catch of the breath, and then came forward once again, to stand staring, like one who is entirely daft, at what lay at my feet.

For the round moon, of a surety, shone down into a tomb; and there before me was a corpse--or what had been a corpse, four hundred years ago. There lay a skeleton, white-boned and horrible--moreover, a skeleton that was encased in armour.

He who lay there before me in the moonlight had once been a man and a soldier of old Spain; for his bony hands were crossed upon his chest and held between them the handle of a naked sword. And at his head was a steel helmet, and the trunk of his body was enclosed in a breastplate; so that I could see naught but his grinning skull and the white bones of his legs and arms.

I stood and looked, and wondered. I wondered who he was, how he had come there, and of the tales that he could tell, were life to return to this bold adventurer of four hundred years ago. Though I do not fear death more than most men, I dread even to this day to look upon the face of it; and it took me time to gather my courage in both hands and to light a fire by the graveside, that I might see the better and solve so much of the mystery as I could.

I have no proof--for we can seldom prove the past--but must weigh what evidence there is. For all that, I am convinced--now that I have thought and talked of it all to John Bannister and others--that I looked then upon the remnants of one of the soldiers of the gallant Orellano. I could not judge of the quality of the rusted steel of his breastplate and his sword; but I should think that he had been an officer of some distinction; since, on close inspection, I discovered that the long blade had been damascened in silver, a metal that will never rust. And that set my mind a-thinking of the great and gallant men who had been the first to cross to the Pacific, to whom to-day--in spite of all their bigotry and cruelty--the world

owes so much.

If one of Orellano's followers had lain buried in this place for all this time, how nearly had the Spaniards come to finding the Greater Treasure! I was not far, I knew, from the Big Fish, though I had searched the Wood for days and never found it. And Orellano had crossed the mountains to the west in search of El Dorado, and, having failed in his purpose, had gone on down to the great river, and thence to the Atlantic. And here lay one of his stout-hearted lieutenants, buried like a Christian warrior, with the arms he had fought with, within a few miles from where the Treasure lay.

Wonder-struck, and not without great reverence, I put back the sword between those bony hands, and then lifted the helmet to see if that, too, could tell me anything concerning this tragedy of long ago. Besides, I was curious to know how the man had met his death. Had he been slain by a savage Indian? Or had he died of some fell, tropical disease? And so I took the helmet in my hands; and when I did so, something white fell out.

I stooped and picked it up, and then examined it by the fire that I had lighted. It was parchment--it was a fragment of a map--a piece torn from the corner of a larger sheet. I looked at it and rubbed my eyes, and looked again, to be sure that I was not dreaming.

If I did not dream, then I was wholly mad. The thought came to me that I had fallen into a fever, and now suffered one of those delusions which are common enough when the heart is racing and the brow dry and burning.

I felt my pulse and the skin upon my forearm, and found that I was wet with sweat. Nor was I mad or dreaming, for I was Dick Treadgold, and my home lay far away, upon the Sussex shore. And yet, that which I held in my hand was the very fragment of John Bannister's map which I myself had torn from the hands of Amos Baverstock--that same fragment which I had thrust, to the full length of my arm, down a rabbit-hole, by Middleton, for fear that it should fall into the possession of that scoundrel, Joshua Trust.

There can be no disputing the testimony of a torn piece of paper. There is, I believe, a celebrated murder trial, quoted in books of law as an example of irrefutable circumstantial evidence, wherein the murderer and the murdered man are each found in possession of a torn piece of newspaper, these two fragments fitting together line for line without a letter missing.

You will never tear a sheet of paper twice in precisely the same way, though you try a million times. In this case, I had the evidence of my eyes and of my memory. It was the very fragment I had snatched from the hands of Amos; I remembered the shape of it; I remembered the shape also of the torn edge of the map that Amos himself had carried into the wilderness; and, above all, there were the letters "AHAZAXA," the rending of the parchment having decapitated

the name "Cahazaxa."

At first sight, what could look more like a miracle? There was no question of coincidence. Here were two facts that, normally, could in no way be related to one another: a rabbit burrows a hole for himself upon the sandhills by the English Channel, and in the sixteenth century a brave Spanish soldier lays down his life, and is buried in the wilderness of South America. It will be readily understood that it took me time to realise what I could certainly not explain.

How came that fragment there? And why? I regarded the stained and yellow parchment that I held in my hand as I sat by the side of the fire, and felt even a trifle afraid of it. I had heard stories of mummies coming to life, of inanimate objects--such as jasper scarabæi, totems, and wooden, heathen gods--becoming active agencies for good or evil. Had this thing taken wings upon itself, and flown across half the world? Fate or luck--call it what you will--had guided me to find it. But why should a document so precious have sought a refuge in the rusted helmet of a soldier of fortune, who once, perhaps, had clinked his sword in the gay courts of Granada or the narrow streets of old Cadiz, who lay now amid the silence of the tropic jungle--a few blanched and silly bones?

I had no answer for these questions of my own, though I sat long into the night and racked my brains for a solution of the problem. It was, in consequence, an hour, as I should guess, before I could look the bare fact in the countenance, before I could acknowledge the situation as it was.

No matter how it came there, by means comprehensible or supernatural, there it was. And then, quite suddenly, I realised what it was. *I had as good as found the Treasure.*

CHAPTER XVI--I FIND THE "BIG FISH"

For a considerable time I had regarded this small piece of parchment in the light of a mystery, a species of conjuring trick, just as one regards the billiard-ball, the rabbit, or the eggs that a conjuror produces from the upturned sleeve of his shirt. But now I saw quite clearly that the thing had an intrinsic value, a significance of

its own; it bore a certain definite message--a message that most nearly concerned myself.

Eagerly, with hands that trembled somewhat, I studied the map. It will be remembered that the portion which Amos possessed had been torn across the place where was marked the Temple of Cahazaxa. Upon the fragment that had come into my hands by so strange and mysterious a chance, I was able to trace the route that I myself had taken from the temple ruins to the Wood of the Red Fish. The ravine was shown, and that wonderful suspension-bridge that had so amazed me when I saw it. From the hills to the east--from the crestline of which I bad viewed the distant glory of the Andes--a track was marked, leading towards the south; whereas I, in hot haste at the time, had continued upon my way due westward.

Now, this track was shown to lead to a certain stream that came forth from the Wood of the Red Fish upon the south. And it was called the Brook of Scarlet Pebbles, an Indian name being thus translated in red ink in the handwriting of John Bannister.

The map had been drawn to no scale. Like many ancient and mediæval documents, it was entirely without proportion or perspective. For instance, the Wood itself--which was never more than fifteen miles across--appeared to be of area equal to that vast tract of country that lay between the great mountain to the north of the forest and the Temple of Cahazaxa--a journey that had taken us many weeks.

There was some sense in this; for in regard to the Wood of the Red Fish, where the Treasure itself was hidden, it was necessary to be precise, if the map were to be of any value. I saw that one must follow the Brook of Scarlet Pebbles, until it entered a pool, where Bannister had written the words: "Electric Eels." There, it appeared, the stream flowed underground, for its course was dotted, and these dots ended at a cross, bearing the words: "THE RED FISH IS HERE."

This cross referred, as I could see at a glance, to certain marginal notes, written in such minute handwriting that it was all that I could do to read them, especially in view of the fact that Bannister's red ink had faded. At last, however, I managed to make out the following inscription:

> "*The tail of the Fish. A blow-pipe from the nose of the Fish. Twenty yards across the Brook. Three feet, below the ground--a Ring.*"

This I read to myself over and over again. At one moment I thought it clear enough, and at the next, too vague. At all events, thought I, I will find out when I get there, for thither I intended to go.

I could not sleep that night, and I will not go so far as to say that I tried to.

I was so thrilled and mystified that my thoughts were running riot; and surely there is little to wonder at in this. The bones of the Spanish warrior lay in the ground beneath me, together with his armour and his sword, for I had put back the tombstone in its place and covered it again with a thin layer of soil. That brave adventurer slept in tranquillity in the silent chamber of the heart of the tropic jungle. He and the sword I have little doubt he had wielded with such subtlety and skill were now alike at rest. His treasure-hunt, at least, was ended; but mine was only just begun.

For I was determined to set forward when the daylight came, to search for the Brook of Scarlet Pebbles. If I found the margin of the Wood, and followed this towards the south, I must sooner or later hit upon the stream--if the map had any claim to accuracy. I could then follow the brook, until eventually I found the Red Fish itself; and, if I could not then associate any definite meaning with the queer, disjointed words in the margin of the map, my own intelligence must alone be held to blame.

One of the reasons why I could not sleep was that I had committed these words to memory and kept repeating them to myself, just like a parrot, without any idea as to their meaning. That they had a meaning I never doubted, for John Bannister himself had written them; and though I was now grown older and had had many strange adventures of my own, I had still my ancient and profound respect for the wisdom of my hero.

I thought of him that night, but more of Amos Baverstock, whom I believed to be somewhere near at hand, upon the same quest as I. On that account, I realised that I must make haste upon the morrow. I had risked so much already, I had undergone so many hardships, that I was determined--now that I thought myself within reach of my goal--to see the business through. From the hills to the east I had looked down upon the Wood, and knew that it was not three days' march from one side to the other, though the undergrowth was thick and tangled; and therefore I knew also that the Red Fish could not be far away.

I think I slept a little in the early hours of the morning, to be awakened by the birds stirring in the trees, and the daylight streaming from above through that same gap by means of which my nightly task had been illumined by the moon. I ate such food as I had left, and then set forth towards the east, guiding my footsteps as well as I was able by the light of the rising sun.

I came, at about midday, to the eastern side of the Wood, and looked out towards the hills whither I had journeyed from the plain. Thence, I turned towards the south and, walking once again in open country, progressed at a fair pace, and never once sat down to rest, until the daylight waned. I went then into the Wood, and searched for berries that I knew were fit to eat; and when I had eaten these, I lay down beneath a great tree and immediately fell fast asleep.

The following morning, I continued my journey along the margin of the Wood. My naked body was now burned by the sun to the colour of an Indian's skin. Indeed, I am not sure that I was not even darker of complexion than the wild woodland people with whom I had lived. My hair was long, like that of a savage, for it had not been cut for months. I had a leather girdle over a shoulder from which depended an Indian quiver filled with darts. And there was something of the joy of life within me, as I swung upon my way. I had health, at least, if I wore no clothes upon my back. I felt convinced that my footsteps were leading me to the hidden Treasure of the Incas; and I tossed my blow-pipe in the air and caught it, time and again.

The joy of life was in me, and the spirit of adventure. The sun shone down upon me, and I breathed deeply of the open air; for the wind was from the east, and the rank smell of decaying vegetation--so general throughout the Wood--was no longer in my nostrils.

And, presently, I came upon the Brook of Scarlet Pebbles. The water was clear as crystal, and I went down upon my knees to drink my fill, for I was thirsty. There was no question that I had found the stream for which I had been searching, since the water flowed over a bed of little rounded stones, every one of which was in colouring some tone or tint of red. They ranged from pink to crimson; and they were all of granite, though worn as smooth as marbles.

Here was the brook that I must follow; so I turned into the Wood again, and all that day followed the course of the stream, which winded and twisted in so many directions that I wondered I had never seen it before.

That afternoon, being hungry for the taste of meat, I killed with my blow-pipe a great bird that I found sitting on a branch, blinking like an owl. I think he was some kind of bustard. At any rate, he was good to eat, when roasted, and I sat long by my camp-fire, picking his bones with my fingers. Then I pulled out my fragment of the map and looked at it.

It was manifest that I was not yet come to that part of the brook where its course was marked by means of little dots; but, knowing the full extent of the Wood, I had a good reason to suppose that I was not far from my destination. And then I read again the queer marginal instructions: *The tail of the Fish*--I must see that for myself; *a blow-pipe from the nose of the Fish*--whatever that might mean, at all events I had a blow-pipe, and a good one, too. As for the rest, I gave it up. It was a riddle that I would solve when I got there--I felt quite sure of that. I folded up the map and placed it in my quiver, the nearest thing to a pocket that I possessed.

And the next day I continued on my way, following the course of the Brook of Scarlet Pebbles. I noticed that these pebbles were now larger than before, and were so deep red in the shadow under the trees that the clear water had the look

of blood. Then I came to the pool, and thought at first that the brook was come to an end.

There were no pebbles here, but mud; and in my eagerness I waded in, to be made at once painfully conscious of a tingling sensation in my legs. Now and again something touched me--something quick and slimy; and each time I received a shock. I had forgotten, for the moment, all about the electric eels; but, when I remembered it, I was more pleased than startled, for I knew that, so far, I was on the right track and that the map could be relied upon.

All about the pool was dense and tangled underwood, the branches of which dipped here and there into the water. And there were also water plants, some with flat, floating leaves, others tall reeds with plume-like heads.

I knew that this pool was not the termination of the brook; and yet, though I searched for a long time, I could find no continuation of the stream, until an idea occurred to me which at once solved the problem. I plucked the little down-like feathers from one of my blow-pipe darts. And these, at intervals of a few yards, I dropped upon the surface of the water, all around the bank of the pool, until I found the stream itself, flowing through a dense clump of thickets.

Through this I broke my way, and as I did so, I remembered the anaconda, and was filled with my old fear of snakes. It was plain already that my surmise had been wrong. The brook did not flow underground, but, for about a hundred yards or so, through a dark and narrow tunnel, formed of low-growing creepers.

So dense were these that I was obliged to break my way, almost every inch; and, though my skin was now near as hard as leather, I was scratched so badly by the thorn-trees that I was bleeding from a score of places upon my chest and shoulders, when I came forth once more into the half-light of the woods.

I could not see at first, for my eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness, and I found myself in an open glade, where the trees were thin and the rays of the sun no more than broken by the leaves above me.

Then I looked, and I saw the brook before me, here flowing straight upon a rocky bed. Indeed, there were rocks everywhere, with rich soil between them, in which were growing many strange and beautiful plants. It was a natural rock-garden, far more wonderful to see than any yet designed by man. The rocks were of dark-red granite, and the flowers there in bloom were all the colours of the rainbow. But I looked not once at them. I gazed, like one hypnotised, upon a great stone to my right; for I had seen at once that this stone was the very shape and image of a fish.

How it stood there I cannot say, for, like the famous toadstone at Tunbridge Wells, which I myself had seen when my mother took me there in childhood, it looked as if it would topple over. For the fish, as fishes are, was big in the head and narrow in the tail; and he stood forth from the ground at an angle of about

sixty degrees, and his mouth was open, and there was a hole--on my side, at any rate--near where his eye should be.

The more I looked at it, the more wonderful I thought it. It might have been graven by the hand of man, and cleverly at that; save that this fish was devoid of fins, and the semblance, as I afterwards discovered, was not so striking from any other point of view.

Stepping from the water, I scrambled over the rocks, where I sat me down, and heaved a great sigh, which I do not pretend to be able to explain. Relief, joy, victory--all were mixed up in it, I do not doubt. Here was I, at the end of all my travels; I had reached the conclusion of my journey. The Big Fish was there.

[image]

"I HAD REACHED THE CONCLUSION OF MY JOURNEY. THE BIG FISH WAS THERE."

To achieve anything is a conquest, great or small. I had sojourned in the wilderness, it seemed, for years; I had stood in constant peril of my life; I had journeyed in company of cut-throats; I had lived with savage men; I had seen something of the glories of old Peru, the Temple of Cahazaxa; I had marched for days and days alone, naked and carrying my Indian blow-pipe in my hand. And there was the Big Fish--the very sign-post, as one might call it, to the Greater Treasure of the Incas.

And as these thoughts jangled in my brain, a shot rang out--how far away I could not tell, but somewhere in the Wood.

CHAPTER XVII--THE GREATER TREASURE

I held my breath and listened, thinking that I would hear other shots, as I had done before. But no sound came to break the stillness. Save for the birds among

the tops of the trees, and a big, solitary monkey that swung himself from branch to branch, chattering as he went, I was surrounded by the silence of the woods.

It was no news to me that I stood in the gravest peril. Such had been the case for many a day; and--as I have said--I had come to look upon life as of little worth. Amos I knew to be somewhere in the neighbourhood; and I knew also that if he found me it would go ill with me; I should not live for long if I fell again into that great villain's clutches.

And yet I did no more than shrug my shoulders. I had sublime faith in myself, in my youth, and the Divine Providence that, so far, had kept me from the way of harm. I had my blow-pipe, too; and, if the worst should happen, I could use it well enough to drive one of my feathered arrows straight into the heart of Amos Baverstock.

One learns, in the everlasting twilight of the woods, where danger lurks on every hand, to live for the moment only, to let the future look after itself. And so did I now; for Amos was no more to me than the jaguar and the anaconda--brutes of prey, all three of them, and the mortal man the vilest. Death in many forms and shapes was all about me--sharp fangs, the serpent's coils, poison, and disease. There was no need to scent from afar such dangers as might never come my way.

And so, once again, I turned my thoughts to the Red Fish, standing forth before me in the sunlight--a quaint and humorous-looking thing, had I been able for a moment to forget its wonderful significance.

I sat and looked at it; it may have been for half an hour, or even more. And my memory took me back to that sunny August morning by the Sussex shore, where I had first heard Amos speak of the Greater Treasure of the Incas; and I remembered, word for word, what he had said: "Gold! It is there knee-deep in a cavern, large as a cathedral." And here was I, Dick Treadgold, in the very place myself, after a series of most strange and unbelievable adventures, thousands of miles from Sussex. My very name, I thought, was to prove a kind of analogue with my destiny and actions; for I was fated, so it seemed, to tread on gold.

And at that, I pulled out my fragment of the map, and looked at it, reading again and again the passage that had puzzled me so often:

> "*The tail of the Fish. A blow-pipe from the nose of the Fish. Twenty yards across the Brook. Three feet, below the ground--a Ring.*"

There, sure enough, was the tail of the Fish--or, at least, the upper part of it, a sharp spur of rock protruding from the ground. I got to my feet and approached, taking my blow-pipe with me.

"*A blow-pipe from the nose of the Fish.*" That clause had always puzzled me. It seemed possible that I should use my blow-pipe as a kind of measuring-rod; but

I could not think in what direction I should place it. Besides, the nose of the Fish was at least six feet from the ground. And then I observed for the first time what I had not perceived before; namely, that the body of the Fish was curved; and it was this that gave me the very clue I wanted. What if I were to use the blow-pipe as a plumb-line?

At all events, I would try. So I drove the blow-pipe into the soft ground, as near the perpendicular as I could judge, in such a manner that it just touched the tip of the Fish's nose.

I read my instructions again--though I already knew them by heart, and tried to guess their meaning. I crossed the brook, which in that place was very shallow, the water reaching little above my ankles; and no sooner did I find myself upon the other side than I observed that my wooden blow-pipe and the sharp, upright spur of rock that formed the Fish's tail were in the same alignment.

"*Twenty yards across the Brook*" could have but a single meaning. Since the Red Fish itself was not that distance from the water, twenty yards must be measured upon the other side; and this I at once resolved to do.

I already had an imaginary line, extending an indefinite distance. If I held to this line--or if, in other words, I kept my blow-pipe immediately between myself and the Fish's tail--I could not go far wrong by stepping the prescribed twenty yards from the margin of the brook.

This I did, and, to verify my position, looked to see that I still had my two fixed points in line with one another. I had verged a little to the left, but soon put this right by taking a short pace in the other direction. And then I repeated to myself the last sentence of my instructions: "*Three feet, below the ground--a Ring*."

Down I went upon all-fours, and began to scrape up the earth in my hands. For the soil was soft, though now and again I hit upon a rock, which, without great difficulty, I loosened with my knife, to cast aside and continue with my work.

It was nightfall by the time that I had gained a depth of three feet or more; but, by then, I had come upon a great, smooth slab of stone; and this discovery set my heart so wildly beating that I was obliged to leave my task and rest awhile, drinking deeply of the water of the brook.

In the moonlight I laboured still, and a slow business it was, displacing the earth a handful at a time, and scratching with the Indian knife that Atupo, the priest, had given me. I was hot and weary, and my finger-tips were painful; and yet I could not desist, but worked on till midnight, to be at last rewarded. I came across a metal ring, fastened to the slab, about eight inches in diameter. And when I had washed the earth away, bringing water in my quiver from the brook, I discovered that this ring was made of gold.

I tugged at it and pulled with all my might, but could not move the stone an inch; so back I went to my work again, grubbing with my hands, for all the world

like a dog that smells a rat. Sheer fatigue at length quite overcame me, and I was obliged to lie down and rest, and fell sound asleep, though I had intended no such thing.

I awoke suddenly, at the first sign of daybreak, and went to the great hole I had made in the ground, and wondered at myself that I had done so much. The stone slab, I saw, was almost clear of earth.

In less than an hour the great slab was free. I cut round the edges of it with my knife, to loosen it, and then looked down upon my work, to see how I might approach the conclusion of my task with the greatest prospect of success.

The stone slab was about three feet wide and twice as long. And the gold ring, I could not fail to notice, was much nearer one end than the other. As the handle is never to be found in the middle of a door, this seemed to suggest that the slab opened upon hinges. It remained to be seen, however, whether or not I had the strength to lift it.

I tried more than once, and failed, though I moved the stone an inch or so. Finally, I went into the Wood and cut a length of liana, one end of which I tied to the golden ring. And then I tugged with all my might; and the stone slab uprose like a derrick on a ship, attained a vertical position, and there remained stationary and upright.

I stepped to the hole and looked down upon a narrow flight of steps all covered with the earth that had fallen from above. Down these I hastened, presently to find myself in utter darkness, so that there was nothing for it but for me to return and look about me for some means of making a torch.

I was now as skilled as any forest Indian in the art of making fire. For months I had journeyed without matches, tinder-box or magnifying-glass. I knew where to find touch-wood in the forest, and could strike sparks from pieces of flint. For an hour I laboured in the making of a torch, which I constructed of touchwood bound about by reeds. And whilst I was thus employed I realised for the first time how hungry I was--for I had eaten nothing for twenty-four hours, though I had consumed great quantities of water.

And now I did a strange thing, in view of the fact that I have always been somewhat impetuous by nature and was then but a boy in years. Though I was actually trembling with excitement, all eagerness to behold the interior of the vault that I knew to be at the foot of the steps, I went deliberately into the jungle in search of food.

Finding no living thing that I could kill but monkeys, I was obliged to content myself with wild nuts and berries; and then I returned to the Red Fish, drank again from the brook, took up my torch and lit it from the fire that I had kindled. And then down I went into the vault, to feast my eyes upon the buried Treasure of the Incas.

The stairway was at first so shallow that I must stoop as I descended; but presently I found myself in a little chamber, hollowed out of the living rock, the walls of which were of the same red granite as the strange stone above. And weird and almost magic did the whole place look in the light of my burning torch.

For the very walls sparkled as with diamonds. Everywhere were little grains of felspar, mica, or quartz, which caught the reflection of the light. And when I looked upon the floor I saw that Amos had been right. I trod upon bars of gold, all of the same length and size, and laid with such regularity and neatness that they might have been the palings of a fence--or many fences--spread flat upon the ground.

How deep these ingots went I could not say, and was not then disposed to inquire, for my attention was attracted by an arched opening, like the doorway of a church, on the other side of the room. Through this I passed, and found myself at the head of another flight of stone steps, much broader and wider than the others--a gigantic stairway that descended into the middle of a chamber so vast that my torch did no more than throw a kind of halo all around me.

I rushed down these steps with a loud, glad cry, and below I hastened like a madman, here and there, passing along the walls, crossing at random that wide, gloomy subterranean room.

Everywhere was gold, stacked upon the floor, piled against the walls. I saw golden chalices and cups, bracelets, rings and girdles; great jugs of gold and golden basins, besides bars and ingots that one might have counted by the thousand.

I know not why it was, but the very sight of it made me dizzy, as I staggered blindly about that wondrous place. At times I slipped and stumbled, and at other times I fell between those glittering stacks, to find myself--as Amos Baverstock had said in my hearing--knee-deep in the very stuff that has made the world as wicked as it is.

And then, at last, I sat down upon I know not what, save that it was gold. The very sight that I had seen had exhausted me far more than all my travels and privations. I felt sick at heart and weary. I looked about me with tired and dreamy eyes.

It seemed to me strange--now that I had beheld this wonder--that I had endured so much for sake of it. How had it come to pass that men prized so highly what after all is no more than yellow metal? Here was enough of it, in very truth, to serve the needs of a nation; and here it had lain for four hundred years--and the world was none the worse. How little of this vast treasure would be enough for me, or even Amos Baverstock, in spite of all his greed!

It frightened me--and that is the truth of it. I could not think what I should do if all this precious wealth were mine. And then I wondered if I had any right to call it mine just because it was mine for the moment to gaze upon, to regard in

breathless bewilderment and fear.

You may behold that which you never own, as you may own that which you never see. Boy though I was, so much was clear to me as daylight. Nor had I any reason to suppose that I was the first to look upon this marvel, since the fugitives from Cuzco, centuries ago, had carried it across the mountains to hide it in this secret place. John Bannister himself, perhaps, had looked upon it, though he had never told me so. If it belonged to any living man, all this wealth was his.

I felt by now as if I were about to faint; and besides, my torch was burning low. And therefore I got unsteadily upon my feet and walked into the little outer room, and thence ascended the steps in the broad light of day. And there I stood breathing deeply, with my eyes closed and my mouth parched as if by thirst.

On a sudden I cast my burning torch into the brook before me, and fell upon my knees and prayed to God. I prayed aloud, as if the living trees and running water and the red stones about me could all hear my prayer. And it was the Lord's Prayer that I had learned at my mother's knee; for, boy though I was, I felt that which I had looked upon was the very pith and kernel of all temptation to which, since Eden, humanity was heir.

CHAPTER XVIII--I FALL IN WITH A FRIEND

I sat for many hours that morning, idle and oppressed by a feeling as of emptiness. What use to me was all the wealth that I had seen--or, for the matter of that, to any one? I had no means at my disposal to take a millionth part of it away.

And then I remembered Amos, and thought it my duty to take what steps I could to see that that dread man should never solve the riddle of the Red Fish, though it was unlikely he would find the place without the aid of my fragment of the map.

The sight of all that gold had, as it were, unnerved me--filled me with a kind of weariness of life. I cannot say exactly how it was, but I know that I had lost, on a sudden, all my energy and enthusiasm; and it was late in the afternoon before I bestirred myself and got to work.

I lowered the great slab and covered it with earth, which I trampled down with my bare feet. Then I went into the woods and dug up plants with my Indian knife, and these I stuck in the ground so that I made a little garden. One shower of tropic rain and they would take root and grow, and thus hide all trace of how the soil had been disturbed. And looking up at the sky, where it was visible here and there between the branches of the trees above me, I saw that such a shower was coming.

The rain fell that evening, when I was camped once more in the woods towards the east, having gone back the way that I had come, following the course of the Brook of Scarlet Pebbles. I took shelter from the rain beneath a tree, the great leaves of which formed a veritable roof above me, so that not one drop of water fell upon the fire that I had kindled.

I ate my simple meal, and then lay down, not to sleep, but to think and to listen to the rain, beating with a noise like many drums upon the leaves.

Well, I had seen the Treasure of the Incas. With my own eyes I had beheld it. And I asked myself if I were any the better for it, and could not see that I was. For gold is mud, and part of man is mud; and yet there is a great God who is above, around and within us all. And that night, as I lay awake in the woods, listening to the drumming of the rain, I tried to think out such problems as man has not yet begun to understand--problems that, perhaps, he may never solve on this side of the grave.

No doubt, the constant propinquity of danger had made me serious for my years. I had lived for many months in the wilderness, and my pulse now beat in rhythm with the earth. The forest, the majestic mountains I had seen at sunrise, the sky of stars above the plain--all these were mysteries to me, wondrous and eternal. But there was neither eternity nor mystery in the work of man; in gold, in the rusted sword of Orellano's soldier, or Cahazaxa's Temple.

I saw quite clearly now that this hidden treasure was no affair of mine. I had lived happily for months as Nature meant me to, and the sum total of my wealth had been my blow-pipe and the knife that Atupo, the priest, had given me. I now understood--far better than I had done at the time--all John Bannister had told me of his dread of cities and of people. I, too, would like to live my life far from the abodes of men, with the little shy things as my friends, in the chamber of the Wild. For the very sight of the Treasure of Kings had frightened me. Four hundred years it had lain there, beneath the ground, like a great, harmful dragon; and it seemed to me that to let this monster loose upon the world would be a bold thing to do--to saddle my conscience with a load of responsibility such as I was never strong enough to bear. I wished now that I was not one of the few who had solved this precious riddle.

And yet I was not sure of anything, for the gold tempted me sorely. I was

tempted more than I can say. If I had now learned to understand something of John Bannister's ideals, I saw also, with alarming clarity, the motives that swayed the deeds of Amos Baverstock. Gold to him was a living force, the origin of all his strength and evil, the prompter of his actions. Once or twice that night was I tempted to return to the Red Fish that I might feast my eyes again upon the Treasure.

I told myself that I had not seen enough of it. I was like a drunkard who had tasted wine. I wondered what worth it had in coinage that I knew, and I set to thinking how I would spend so vast a sum.

But these were thoughts only of the night-time, in the darkness and the silence of the woods. I fell asleep at last, sick at heart and wretched; but dawning day came to me with comfort, and I continued on my journey with new hopes and prospects.

The dragon was behind my back, buried once again. For all I cared, it might lie there for ever, untouched by mortal hand, unseen by mortal eye, to be smothered in the dust of endless ages.

As for myself, when I came forth from the undergrowth of the wood into the warm light of the evening sun, I turned to the south, and continued on my way until long after dark. I had made up my mind, and that was something; I would pass round the Wood of the Red Fish, and journey westward towards the great mountains. These I would cross, and come down upon the tableland beyond, where I knew that I would find men who were as civilised as I. Thence, as best I could, I must find my way back to England. I had little doubt that I might be able to work a passage for myself on board a ship that sailed from Callao or Guayaquil.

But I was a fool to think my adventures so nearly at an end. My destiny was no more in my own hands than that of a withered leaf, carried here and there by the wind.

I found the western side of the Wood to be very different from the other. It was a country broken up by rocky spurs that descended from the foothills just above me; and the ravines or little valleys that lay between these spurs were densely choked with undergrowth, similar in all respects to the thickets in the wood.

It was no easy travelling, and yet there was no other road for me to take, for to the north lay the big morass that I had observed from the hill-top on the morning when I first looked down upon the Wood.

So I made my way along the crestline of a rocky ridge, setting forth upon my journey to the Andes early in the morning with the whole day before me. Though the rays of the sun were powerful, the day was cool, for a soft breeze was blowing from the mountains. I had not yet breakfasted, since I thought it likely that in this more open country I might kill with my blow-pipe some animal that

was good to eat; and, therefore, as I marched upon the way, I kept my eyes open, looking into the ravines on either side of me, to see if I could catch a glimpse of any living thing. And I had not gone far before--to my bewilderment--I set eyes upon the solitary figure of *a man*.

I dropped, on the instant, flat upon my face--for I was now a savage in more ways than one. I had all the instincts of the wild man who knows that danger may lurk behind every tree and shrub and rock. I lay upon the ground, still as a lizard, with my eyes upon the stranger. And the more I looked at him the more I wondered.

The Forest Indians were small in stature, as I have observed in the proper place. But this man was six feet in height. He was as brown as I; and yet he wore clothes--clothes which were all in rags and tatters, and a pair of boots, split open at the toe-caps and bound with string about his ankles. Moreover, he carried in his hand a rifle; and this rifle he used as a staff, placing the butt upon the ground and leaning with his whole weight upon it as he limped slowly and painfully upon his way down the ravine immediately beneath me.

I have said that I had the instincts of a wild man. I was cautious, shy and cunning. I had learned to trust no one, to be suspicious of every one. And so I lay and watched him.

It occurred to me, by degrees, that I had seen him before. I could not for the life of me remember where. Then he sat down, with his face toward me.

He had a rough, weather-beaten, and yet a kindly, face. He had steel-grey eyes, and a rough, tangled beard. He was so close to me that I could see that his bare arms were tattooed; and it was this, perhaps, that gave me the clue I wanted. I looked at his beard again, and, unkempt as it was, it reminded me somehow of the beard of a Russian Czar. This man was William Rushby.

I was not sure of it at first. He was greatly changed from the honest sailor who had befriended me on board the *Mary Greenfield*. But when my mind was made up, and I was well-nigh carried away by mingled feelings of astonishment and gladness, I got to my feet and went towards him with my blow-pipe in my hand.

Without any ado, he whipped the butt of his rifle into the hollow of his shoulder, and I saw the sights were directed straight upon my heart.

"Hands up!" he cried to me in English. "Hands up, you brown barbarian, or else I shoot you dead!"

I grasped the truth in an instant; and it is well I did, for I have little doubt that he would have shot me where I stood. If William Rushby had changed in personal appearance since last we met, of a certainty I myself had changed still more. He took me for a wild man of the woods, though he yelled at me in English, and would have killed me out of hand, had I not lifted my arms and answered him,

[image]

"'HANDS UP!' HE CRIED. 'HANDS UP, YOU BROWN BARBARIAN, OR ELSE I SHOOT YOU DEAD!'"

and laughed.

"Rushby!" I cried. "Do you not know me? It is I--Dick Treadgold."

He brought down his rifle, and stared at me like one who sees a ghost.

"Dick!" said he, and then came forward, holding out his great hand, into which I placed my own.

And there we stood, and shook hands with one another, as though we had met at Charing Cross. And he was near as naked as I, and we were both so burned by the sun that the whites of our eyes were almost comical, and our hair was long like that of gipsies, and the skin upon our legs and arms had been scratched in scores of places by the thorn-trees in the forest.

"Dick!" he cried again. "I can see it now, though I would never have believed it."

"It is I who am asked to believe the most," said I. "How came you here, of all people in the world?"

"There's a yarn at the back of that," said he. "But, first, you must tell me how you escaped from Amos."

He seated himself, as he spoke, upon a boulder that lay in the ravine; and when he moved I was reminded of a fact I had perceived already--Rushby was badly wounded and lame of a leg.

For all that, I saw that he would glean little in the way of information if we did nothing but ask one another questions; so I mastered my own curiosity, and replied to him.

"Why," I told him, "Amos tied me to a tree, and left me in the wilderness to starve. And then I fell into the hands of savage men, to whom I shall be ever grateful. From their dwellings in the forest I journeyed alone to Cahazaxa's Temple, and thence across the plain to the Wood of the Red Fish, where I find an old friend, and still believe that I am dreaming. It is months now since I last set eyes upon a white man, and that was Amos Baverstock himself."

"Months!" cried Rushby in amazement. "You've not seen Baverstock--for months!"

He looked at me as if he thought that I was lying. I was at a loss to know what he was driving at, though I assured him that I spoke the truth.

"Months!" he repeated, holding his head between his hands, as if his puzzled

brains were paining him. "But we were told, two days ago, that Amos held you prisoner."

"Who told you?" I demanded.

I was now as surprised as he, and even more astonished when I heard his answer.

"Baverstock himself," said Rushby.

"Amos!" I exclaimed. "You have seen him, then?"

"He lied to me!" cried Rushby, driving his clenched fist into the palm of a hand. "He lied to me! And Bannister was right."

"Bannister!" I echoed.

But Rushby, rocking his shoulders from side to side like a man who suffers anguish, stamped a foot upon the ground.

"Oh, but I have done a fool's thing!" he cried. "I have been fooled, and I have sent John Bannister to death!"

I stood before him, speechless, gasping. Though I could make neither head nor tail of what he had told me, I could see with my eyes that the man was suffering torture in his soul. If Bannister was in danger, if it was possible to save anything from the fire, it was I myself--and I alone--who was capable of action, since Rushby was dead lame. And yet I must first know the truth of the matter, for I was wholly in the dark.

I went to Rushby and laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"Come, tell me what it all means," said I. "Tell me your story from the first."

He looked up at me, and then for the first time smiled--a sad smile, none the less.

"Sit down," he answered, in a calmer voice. "I will tell you all from the beginning, as quickly as I can."

CHAPTER XIX--THE BOATSWAIN TELLS HIS STORY

This that follows is the story that was told to me by William Rushby, sometime boatswain of the *Mary Greenfield*, as we sat together side by side in the ravine, the while John Bannister had gone forth alone in peril of his life.

To begin with, he reminded me of that evening when he had spoken to me through the porthole on the ship, when I was held a prisoner in the cabin that I shared with Amos Baverstock. After that--it will be remembered--I never saw him again; for when the ship arrived at Caracas, I was transported by night to the hills beyond the town.

As for Rushby, he fell in with a friend--and that is the best of being a sailor, who is never at a loss for a handshake and a word of greeting in every port in all the world. For the boatswain, when the ship was alongside the wharf, had seized the opportunity to desert, and lay in hiding in the town, until news was brought him that Amos and his party had set forth across the mountains. He then worked his way to Rio, and a month later turned up in Southampton, where by the merest chance he found John Bannister, about to set forth in quest of me across the Western Ocean.

The boatswain told Bannister all he knew, and together they searched in the warren for the rabbit-hole in which I had hidden my fragment of the map. This they found at last, not much the worse for wear; and having set my mother's fears at rest, so far as they were able, they started forth together for the port of Colon; for Bannister, knowing whither Amos Baverstock was bound, deemed that the shortest route.

From Colon they crossed the Isthmus to Panama, and thence sailed--as Pizarro himself had done--down the coast to Guayaquil, the port of Equador.

From this place they journeyed inland, passed the great height of Chimborazo, the summit of the Andes, and thence eastward, a march of many weeks, into the Wild Region of the Woods.

Bannister realised from the first that his task was well-nigh impossible. He might as well hope to find me in the forest as a needle in a haystack; and so, knowing where the treasure was, he went straight to the Wood of the Red Fish, there to await the arrival of Amos and the others.

He had started some months after us, but he had taken the shorter route and had been delayed by nothing. For all that, he arrived in the neighbourhood of the Red Fish some weeks after Amos; for he and Rushby heard nothing of the fight which took place when Atupo laid his ambush and Forsyth was so badly wounded.

Amos--as we know--returned across the plain to wreak his vengeance upon the Peruvian priests in the Temple of Cahazaxa. Then the man's greed of gold drew him westward once again to search for the Big Fish, as the natives called the treasure.

It was then that Vasco, the Spaniard, struck by the merest chance the trail of John Bannister and Rushby. A fight took place between them, and those were the shots which I myself had heard, one of which had sorely wounded the boatswain in the leg.

John Bannister had saved his comrade's life. William Rushby was a big man, broadly made and heavy; but Bannister had whipped him up as though he were a child and carried him all night throughout the jungle, with the result that Amos, for the time being, lost all trace of them, though he was searching in all directions in the Wood.

It is a wonder, indeed, and something to be thankful for, that Amos and his friends never stumbled across myself, whilst I was wandering about with my blow-pipe and my arrows in search of the Red Fish, not knowing where to look. For I was not then in possession of the map, of which I have now to tell, and how it was that I found it in so singular a place.

Rushby was a wounded man and weak from loss of blood, and now Bannister himself--great as was his strength--being overcome by his exertions, fell into a raging fever. Knowing the Wood of old, he had carried Rushby to the place of the Tomb of Orellano's soldier; and whilst in hiding there he became so ill that for three days he raved, delirious. And he had no one but a wounded man to tend him.

They had no food, and were without means of getting any; for the boatswain could not walk a dozen yards, but from time to time must drag himself on all-fours to the stream to fetch his companion water to drink.

Rushby, left to his own resources, and suffering the greatest pain, had little

doubt that they were lost. Look at the affair which way he might, he could see no way out of their difficulties; they must either be found by Baverstock or else starve to death. For himself, he cared not which way it ended; but upon one thing he was determined--the fragment of the map which they had brought with them from my rabbit-hole in Sussex should never fall into the hands of Amos Baverstock.

And so it was William Rushby himself who opened the tomb, and hid the map in the helmet of the Spanish soldier. And that was how I found it, a few days afterwards; for the earth had been disturbed and trampled underfoot.

The night after that, when John Bannister was a little recovered of his fever, though still terribly weak, they heard the report of a shot-gun, fired not far from where they were; and Rushby, realising that Amos was still upon their track, made the supreme effort of his life, hoping thereby to save both Bannister and himself.

It was the old case of the blind leading the blind; for the one was so weak that he tottered when he walked, and the other was lame of a leg, with an open, septic wound that would not heal. But together, with their arms around each other, they made good their escape, only to be caught later in the great morass that lay upon the northern side of the Wood, and being at the end of their resources and well-nigh starved to death, they had no option but to surrender and without condition.

There is no question Amos would have killed John Bannister then and there had it not been for one potent circumstance: Bannister knew the secret of the Big Fish. Both Baverstock and Trust regarded my friend as their arch-enemy, who had foiled them more than once; and Rushby told me of the look of unutterable hatred that was stamped upon every evil feature of the face of Amos whenever he looked at Bannister--which he did, by the same token, no more often than he had to, since it was plain to see that he found it hard to meet the eyes of one stronger than himself both in mind and body, and a thousand times more honest.

And here, in his narrative, the boatswain became, on a sudden, wildly excited, and pointed to a palm-tree that stood not far away from where we both were seated, about a hundred yards down the ravine.

"You see that tree?" he cried; and I nodded in reply. "Well, then," Rushby continued, "the villain bound Bannister to that--bound him hand and foot, and stood before him with a loaded rifle in his hands. He cursed him; he threatened and blasphemed. He said that if Bannister would not tell him where the treasure was, he would shoot him on the spot. But he might as well have tried to frighten those white bones in the tomb where I myself had hid the map."

William Rushby paused, and ran his fingers through his beard. I never saw a man who looked more miserable than he. And yet, so foolish was I, indeed, that I did naught but ask him silly questions, when time was of as much account as the life of the most heroic man that ever lived.

"And Bannister would not speak?" said I.

"Speak!" the boatswain cried. "Speak he did, and to the point. He told Baverstock to shoot."

He was silent for a moment, and sat looking at the open wound in his leg.

"I never saw any one more angry," he continued, "and I have served in my day under many men of the same stamp as James Dagg, if not so bad as he. All that night I lay awake, dead sure that Baverstock would murder Bannister, if on the following morning he still refused to speak."

"And you were camped in this ravine?" I asked.

"In this same place," said Rushby; "for I have not moved since a hundred yards."

"And where are the others?" I asked.

"Listen!" said the boatswain. "I can do no more than spin a yarn from the beginning. I am coming to what you want to know. Baverstock, his threats having failed with Bannister, played his trump-card upon me, and won the trick. Leaving Bannister still weak from fever, bound hand and foot, he came to me by night and talked in whispers. He told me that he held you a prisoner, and, like a fool, I believed him. He said that if he did not learn the truth in regard to the exact position of the Big Fish he would put not only Bannister and myself to death, but also you, whose life he had purposely preserved throughout all these months."

"He lied!" I interrupted.

"I know he did," said Rushby. "But I swallowed all those lies as a shark takes a baited hook. I was neither strong nor wise like Bannister. For my own life I cared not greatly, but I was loth to behold John Bannister put to death, and I knew how much he cared for you, and how he would grieve if you were to die through any fault of mine. And thus it was that I told Amos Baverstock the truth. I told him that we had brought with us from Sussex your little fragment of the map; and I told him that I had hidden it within the helmet in the Tomb of the Spanish soldier.

"He said no more to me that night, but posted Vasco, the Spaniard, as a sentry, with orders to see that Bannister and I did not communicate. And at daybreak the next morning, in the utmost haste, he and his three companions went back into the Wood to find the map in the Spaniard's Tomb, and thence to discover the Red Fish itself, where the gold of Peru is hidden."

When I heard that, I burst into loud laughter. Rushby looked at me, surprised, and asked me why I laughed.

"He will never find it," I cried. "He will never find the map! For it is no longer in the Tomb."

"Not in the Tomb!" he burst forth. "Then, where is it? And how do you know where it is?"

"Because it is here," said I. And as I said the words, I pulled forth the little piece of parchment from the quiver in which I kept my blow-pipe arrows.

Rushby looked at it, recognised it at once, and sat staring at me, as if, on a sudden, he had been bereft of his senses.

"How did you get this?" he blurted out.

I told him in a few words how I had found it.

"Merciful powers!" he groaned. "What have I done? Bannister is on a wild-goose chase after all!"

He again carried his hands to his head, and sat rocking from side to side, as he had done before. I got to my feet, and shook him violently; for--though as yet I understood no more than half the matter--I saw that there had been some great mistake that was like to cost us dearly.

"What is it?" I cried. "Tell me the truth! Even now, it may not be too late to make amends. Tell me what has happened."

He looked up at me with a sad face. I am inclined to think that there were even teardrops in his eyes.

"When Baverstock and those with him were gone," said he; "when they were returned to the Wood and lost to view, I picked up my jack-knife, and limped to the tree, where I cut Bannister's bonds. You must understand that Amos departed that morning in such hot haste that he left behind our knives and rifles, as well as much of his own equipment. However, that is neither here nor there. I was obliged to tell Bannister the truth; and, no sooner had I done so, than he made me realise what a simpleton I was.

"He told me that I had been a fool to hide the map in any place where it could afterwards be found. It had been better had I torn it to shreds. Nor would he believe that you were still in the hands of Amos Baverstock. And the very thought that this unholy villain was to solve at last the riddle of the Big Fish gave, upon the instant, new strength to Bannister. For then and there he rose to his feet, and said that he was going himself into the Wood, that he would reach the Tomb in advance of Amos and take possession of the map."

"He has gone there!" I shouted, like a maniac, springing to my feet and pointing towards the Wood.

"Yes," said Rushby. "He said that he would rather die a thousand times than that Amos should find the Treasure."

I felt as if I had received a violent blow. I knew not, for the moment, what to do. And then I saw my course quite clear before me.

"I'll go to him!" I cried. "Take that, and keep it safe."

And I flung at him my portion of the map, and then snatched up my blow-pipe and my quiver filled with darts, and set off running down the ravine, as fast as my legs would carry me, towards the Wood.

CHAPTER XX--I RETURN TO THE SOLDIER'S TOMB

I had every reason to be filled with apprehension. I was going, of a certainty, into danger greater than any I had yet encountered. Whilst searching in the Wood for John Bannister, my friend, I was like as not to fall in with Amos Baverstock; and if that should happen, I could hope for little mercy.

Bannister--as Rushby had told me--was weak from illness and half starved,, so that much of his great strength of former days must have deserted him, when most he had a need of it. Besides, I knew not whether he were armed, for that was a question I had not stayed to ask when I hurried forth from the ravine upon my quest.

I had therefore some cause to be afraid. And yet, in my heart, I was glad as I had never been for months, as I raced upon my way into the darkness of the Wood.

I was journeying towards my friend, the great man whom I had learned to honour and admire upon the beach in Sussex. And I believed that the Fates would not be so cruel to me that I should fail to find him. I felt that I would soon look upon him once again, feel the iron grasp of his hand, and behold the light of recognition in his kindly eyes.

Many hours of daylight were before me, when I entered the Wood of the Red Fish; and then, for the first time I think, I realised that my task was not an easy one. Had I started from the other side of the Wood, I believe that I could have found the Spaniard's Tomb without much loss of time; for I was by now well acquainted with that portion of the jungle.

But in this neighbourhood I was an utter stranger, though I had the sun to guide me whenever I caught glimpses of the daylight between the overhanging branches of the trees. Also, I carried in my mind a very perfect recollection of the map.

I saw that it was necessary above all else to calm myself, to think the matter out, instead of plunging into the business like a bolting horse. My destination was the Spaniard's Tomb, and I was in possession of certain valuable information, the most of which was quite unknown to Amos. The Wood of the Red Fish itself was diamond-shaped, the four angles approximately directed towards the north, south, east, and west. Now, the Big Fish lay somewhere in the very centre of the Wood; and I had formerly journeyed to the place from the south, following the Brook of Scarlet Pebbles. This brook--as I had observed--flowed in a north-westerly direction, towards the morass, which I had passed at the end of the ravine in which I had just left William Rushby.

During the earlier days when I had adventured all alone, when I had discovered both the Glade of Silent Death and the Tomb of Orellano's soldier, I am convinced that I had never crossed the Brook of Scarlet Pebbles. Indeed, I could scarce have done so without noticing at once the singular character of the stream. I had become, during these months extraordinarily observant; and my attention would certainly have been attracted by the peculiar red stones with which the bed of the brook was strewn. Hence, by a simple process of deduction, I was forced to the conclusion that the Spaniard's Tomb must be somewhere in the north-westerly part of the Wood; and the reader will the better understand me if he glances at the map which I myself have made, and which he must not think a facsimile of the real parchment map whereon the Tomb was not even mentioned.

[image]

Map of the Wood of the Red Fish

I was now, as I knew, somewhere on the southern side of the brook; and that was the wrong side, if I was to find the Tomb with as little delay as possible. Aided, therefore, by the position of the morning sun, I directed my footsteps in a northerly direction, and came early in the afternoon upon the Brook of Scarlet Pebbles, to the north of the Big Fish. Thence, I decided to journey due eastward, hoping, sooner or later, to come upon some place that I would recognise, which would inform me of my whereabouts.

Sunset overtook me when I was in the very heart of the jungle. There was just time to search for food before the darkness came; and then I lay down to rest without venturing to light a fire.

I remember well that, at the time, I was surprised that I did not find myself oppressed by the almost overwhelming sense of loneliness that hitherto had always come upon me when I journeyed by myself in the midst of the silent woods.

But, now that I am old, and have thought much upon many things, I have an explanation--howbeit somewhat mystical--to account for the happiness I then experienced. I knew that I was near my friend.

I was fortified by memory. Thus it was with me. And more than that; for it looked as if I was to give a helping hand to the great strong man whom I had seen first upon the Sussex coast, who had told me of the hooded crows, and to whose tales of travel I had listened eagerly, day after day, before ever Amos Baverstock and the like of him had stepped across my path. I would find the Tomb--upon that I was determined. And I would find Bannister as well. Perhaps he was sleeping, even then, not two hundred yards away from me, in that tangled, tropic wilderness. With so pleasant a reflection I fell sound asleep, and slept until daylight wakened me and the birds and monkeys were stirring in the trees.

I walked many miles that day, looking everywhere in vain for some tree or stream that I should recognise, for the burnt-out embers of an old camp-fire or the feathers of some bird that I myself had plucked and eaten. But I found nothing, until late in the afternoon, when I came, of a sudden, upon the dried-up skin of a small woodland deer.

There also were his bones, dried and whitened, all the flesh therefrom devoured by creeping insects. And, thinking it more than likely that this was the same deer that had served me for many a meal, when I first was come into the Wood--the same poor beast that had been crushed to death by the great serpent that had lain in hiding beneath the water of the pool--I cast about me, and soon found the Glade of Silent Death. And now, I knew, I was on the right track to the Tomb, which from this place lay towards the south; for I had a first-hand knowledge of all this portion of the Wood, where I had sojourned for many days.

Then an idea came to me whereby valuable time might be saved. I was not far from the edge of the Wood, and if I could gain this before the darkness came I might travel some distance southward by night, to continue my searching in the morning. Keeping, therefore, the setting sun at my back, I journeyed eastward, and came presently to open country, when I travelled a good two miles to the south by the light of the rising moon.

Late at night I rested, sleeping till daybreak; and then, entering the Wood again, I found by chance one of my old camping-places, and following my old trail for several hours came at last--as I expected--upon the Tomb of Orellano's soldier.

As it was then almost dark, I hastened immediately to the Tomb, and threw back the stone slab. There was light enough for me to see at a glance that nothing had been touched. There were the white bones, the breast-plate, sword and helmet--exactly as I had left them. I stood irresolute a moment, looking down into the grave; and all at once, a great fear possessed me that some calamity had overtaken Bannister.

I was here in advance of both him and Amos--which was more than I had ever hoped for. The next thing to decide was what to do, and--as will be seen, in a moment--I was given no choice in the matter.

Fear spreads, I think, like fire. I was solicitous, at first, for Bannister; and then I feared for myself. Or there may be something in the notion that the evil that is in a man taints the very atmosphere in which he moves. At any rate, even as I thought of Amos Baverstock, I became filled, on a sudden, with my old dread of him. I stood shivering, as if from cold, beneath the trees, by the side of that ancient grave, whilst the darkness spread around me.

And then it was that the voice of Amos Baverstock himself came to my ears with such startling suddenness that I was taken unawares. It was just as if I had received some kind of electric shock. I straightened with a jerk, and I verily believe that my heart itself stood still.

I had not been able to hear the exact words he used; but I knew only too well the hard, strident tones of his voice. I think he called upon Joshua Trust to make haste and not to lag behind, and the language that he used was vile as always.

I stood where I was, stock-still, like one transfixed. And then I heard the breaking of the undergrowth, as someone rapidly approached.

I felt much as a mouse must feel, when the trapdoor closes after him. I was spurred into sudden action. And yet there was nothing I could do.

If I rushed into the thickets, my enemies must hear me. And what chance had my blow-pipe against a leaden bullet? I looked up at the trees around me, and saw at once that there was not one that I could climb without a deal of trouble. And yet, Amos himself was coming nearer and nearer, as I could tell by the breaking of the underwoods and the dead sticks upon the ground. On a sudden, without a thought, I jumped down into the Tomb, and pulled the stone slab into its place above me.

It is easy to say that this was the action of a fool. I attempt no more than to relate what happened. That no man in a calm moment would have done anything so rash and stupid, I would never for a moment deny. I was, however, very far from calm. If the truth be told, I was afraid. I hid my face like an ostrich--for that is all it comes to.

And as soon as I found myself lying at full length upon those white and aged bones in the darkness of the grave, I realised that I was lost--that it had been far better for me had I fled into the jungle. Amos himself must shift the slab to search the Tomb for the map that he believed he would find within.

And presently, through the opening in the slab, I heard, with a distinctness that was indeed alarming, the voice of the man himself.

"It is here!" he cried. "We've found it, as I said we would!"

From the certain fact that no one answered him, I judged that Baverstock

was alone; and I was the more sure of this, since I could hear the footsteps of but a single man upon the thin stone above me. And I began to reckon what my chances would amount to, if it came to a square fight between the two of us, with no one to intervene.

Then I remembered that I was unarmed; for I had left my blow-pipe above ground, though the chances were that it was now so dark that he might not notice it. By the noise he made, his grunting and his muttered oaths, I judged that he was searching for the means to lift the slab.

I touched the stone above me with my fingers; and when I felt it moving, I knew that the hour of my ordeal was come. I must fight and defend myself, or die--and very likely both. I rose as the stone was lifted, and, as I did so, placed the Spaniard's helmet on my head and took up the rusted sword.

Amos threw aside the slab, and then jumped backward, as I stood up in the grave, waist-deep in mother earth.

It was that half-light which is neither night nor day--a weird and ghostly light, pervading like a mist the shadows of the Wood. Small wonder that that evil man thought that he beheld the resurrection of a corpse!

He let out a shriek--such a shriek as I never heard before or since--that seemed as if it must have been audible for miles throughout the evening silence of the jungle. It was the shriek of one whose hair stands upright on his head. He stood before me quaking at the knees; and then he found his voice again.

"Mercy!" he cried.

And at that I rushed upon him with my sword.

CHAPTER XXI--I AM MADE A GHOST, AND THEN A FOOL

I sprang at him with my sword, the rusty blade that I had filched from those grim and whitened bones.

The man was at my mercy. He was unarmed, having laid aside his rifle before he approached the Tomb. He trembled in every limb as he fled before my

onslaught, and cried out aloud for pity, as I jabbed at him in a kind of vicious frenzy.

In the twilight his face looked pale-green in colouring, and his little pig-like eyes seemed in danger of springing from his head. It would be difficult to conceive an expression upon which abject terror was more strongly marked.

Amos Baverstock was an evil man in many ways, and a brave man in others; else he had never risked his life so often amid the dangers of the tropic wilderness. Courage of a sort he had in plenty, but, because he was evil in his nature, he feared death and all connected with the grave, though I had never thought to find him as superstitious as he was. He had always struck me as a hard, calculating man, who looked upon the practical side of all things. And yet, without a doubt, he now took me for a ghost.

And after all--when the full facts are considered--his mistake was excusable; even to-day, when I call to mind that scene which was enacted in the half-light of the woods, I am inclined to laugh at it all, for there was something ludicrous about it.

I wore the helmet of the dead man, and had sprung at Amos out of the Tomb, without giving him time to think. Assuredly, in his eyes, what else could I have been but an infuriated ghost, dangerous and active because my peace and solitude had been disturbed.

I thrust at him savagely in the darkness, whilst he hurried here and there, in and out among the trees, yelling like a fiend. How hideous he was! I can see him now, with his hunchback, his green face, his staring eyes, his mouth contorted in terror. For all that he was quick and agile, and once or twice eluded a sword-thrust that would have pierced him to the heart.

And then, at last, I had him. I carried my sword in my right hand, and, as I lunged, he jumped aside, towards the left. As quick as thought I caught him by the throat. Whereat he fell down before me on his quaking knees, and clasped his hands in the attitude of one who pleads for mercy.

He was in my power. I said not a word, but clenched my teeth, and looked into those eyes that even then I feared. I drew back my sword, and then paused a moment; for I had no liking for the work, which was the hangman's job.

"Mercy!" he groaned.

I took in a deep breath, like a man about to dive. I felt that I must brace myself for this red task of common justice. I looked at his body, clothed in tatters, to select a spot most vulnerable where I might plunge my rusted sword.

"Mercy!" he cried again.

I clenched my teeth. I was on the point of speaking, but fortunately did not.

I could hear him breathing heavily.

And thereupon, on a sudden, I was felled by some one who had crept upon

me from behind. I was felled like an ox. A single blow upon the back of the head sent me over like a ninepin, and I lay stretched at my full length upon the ground, but half-conscious, with a singing sensation in my head.

Presently I sat up and looked about me. There was Amos, still upon his knees, as green as ever. And immediately above me stood one whom I did well to recognise as Mr. Gilbert Forsyth.

That place was dimly illumined by the white light of the newly-risen moon, turning the leaves upon the trees above us to a glistening silver.

Forsyth was wearing the remnants of a pair of trousers, the legs of which ended in a tattered fringe a little below his knees. He was naked to the waist, around which was a belt, crammed with knives and pistols.

I remembered his curled whiskers and his pomaded moustache on the morning when I had first set eyes upon him, when I lay hidden in the gorse-bush. His fair hair now had grown so long that it reached to his shoulders; and his whiskers had spread into a short, shaggy beard, which was divided somewhat in the middle like that of a Frenchman or a Sikh. I had thought of him always as a very immaculate gentleman; but here was a desperate, piratical blade who, one might easily believe, chewed glass and compelled his unhappy victims to walk the plank.

He looked at me and folded his arms; and then spoke in a voice quite calm.

"And who the blazes are you?" he asked.

I was wise enough not to answer. Ghosts--so far as I knew--could never speak. And was I not a ghost?

If I had been a fool to go down into the Tomb, I showed at least a little wisdom in now holding my tongue. For this, however, I take no credit. I could not foresee the course that events would take. I had been surprised and mastered, and cursed myself because I had not killed Amos out of hand, when the man was in my power. Disappointed, disgusted with myself, I was stubborn as a mule. They might do what they would, they might torture me, but still I would not speak.

Forsyth repeated his question; and for answer, I rushed again at Amos, and even then would have killed him, had not the other caught me in his arms and held me fast.

The man was stronger than I thought; for, though I kicked and struggled, I could not free myself. Amos, as he watched us, regained a little of his common-sense, and got slowly upon his feet.

"No ghost," said he. "No ghost." And he went on repeating the words as if he were a parrot.

"Ghost!" laughed Forsyth. "If this is a ghost, he is a warm-blooded one, and as vicious as they make 'em."

"Then, who is he?" asked Baverstock. "I swear to you, he came out of the Tomb, as I'm a living man."

"And he's another," added Forsyth. "Who he is, or what business he has in such a place as this, I can no more say than you can. None the less, the circumstantial evidence is all against mortality. I am reminded, my friend, of the Carthaginian Queen: '*Exoriare aliquis nostris ex ossibus ultor*'--(May some avenger arise from my bones). I call this individual 'Hannibal,' on that account."

"Who wants your Latin gibberish!" cried Amos. "Look plain facts in the face; call a spade a spade."

"Also," said Forsyth, in his usual sing-song voice, "call a man a man, and not a ghost."

"If he's alive," said Amos, coming even nearer, "then, who is he? I tell you, when I lifted the tombstone, he sprang forth like a Jack-in-a-box, and, had it not been for you, I would never have escaped with life."

"I have told you already," said the other, "I know no more of him than you do."

It was then that they were joined by the Spaniard, Vasco, and Joshua Trust, who came together from the darkness of the thickets into the full light of the moon. And when they saw me, they also were afraid; for I still wore the helmet on my head and stood at no great distance from the open grave.

Forsyth explained the situation in a few words, with many a wave of the hand, as if he introduced us. Baverstock, in the meantime, was rapidly becoming his normal self. He seemed to have forgotten, for the time being, the very object of his journey.

"There's some mischief here!" on a sudden he exclaimed. "Rushby told us we would find the map beneath the helmet of the Spaniard."

At this, Forsyth laughed, and pointed straight at me.

"And since our Hannibal," he observed, "wears such a headgear somewhat out of fashion, we may safely presume that he could tell us where the map is, if he had the power to make us understand--which, for myself, I doubt."

The truth then dawned upon me on the instant. Mr. Gilbert Forsyth, for all his cleverness and calmness, was as fully in the wrong as Amos Baverstock had been; for he believed me to be a savage, whereas the other had taken me for a ghost, the awful apparition of a bygone Spanish soldier. If I had refused to speak before from sheer pigheadedness, I was now resolved to play the part that I was cast for, putting my trust in Providence and fortified by resolution. Though they burnt my flesh with red-hot irons, I was determined I would never speak.

They questioned me in every barbarous language that they knew. Vasco and Amos himself were my inquisitors, for Trust was no scholar, and Forsyth's learning went no further than the dead classic tongues, and, I believe, a little French. But I just gaped at them like a fool, and at last they gave it up as a bad business; and Amos, by now well convinced that I was human, struck me a cowardly blow

across the mouth.

They looked in the Tomb; they searched everywhere for the map. They made a great fire of brushwood that they might see the better, and neglected no possible hiding-place where that little strip of parchment might be hidden. They looked inside my quiver, and even in the hollow of my blow-pipe. And then, at length, quite late at night, they gave it up. And in an ill mood they were, especially Trust and Amos.

They must have thought, however, that I was likely to be of some use to them, for they bound me hand and foot before I was permitted to lie down to rest. They were evidently not disposed to set me free, until they had solved the riddle I presented. They were altogether at a loss to explain who I was or why--apparently of my own free will--I had gone down into that grim and ancient vault. I think, even then, they connected me in some way or other with Bannister himself.

Left alone, I was given time to think, and I lay awake that night for many hours, wondering what would happen.

There were exactly three reasons why they should not have recognised me: firstly, I was so altered in appearance, so brown and wrinkled by the sun, with my hair all long and shaggy, that I do not think my own mother herself would have known me; secondly, my face had been half-hidden by the helmet I had worn; and, thirdly--the most potent fact of all--they never dreamed for a moment that I was yet alive. Months before, they had tied me to a tree, and left me to starve to death in the great forest many miles away across the plain beyond Cahazaxa's Temple. And, as I remembered this, it occurred to me that, even if they were to recognise me, they might again believe me to be a ghost, since for so long they had been certain I was dead.

These were my thoughts as I lay awake, too near the fire for comfort; and as I was thinking, I observed a singular phenomenon, which at first gave me cause for new alarm.

Amos, Forsyth, and Vasco were sound asleep, and Joshua Trust was on watch, seated on the ground a little way from me. He was not particularly alert. Indeed, he was occupied in the kind of pastime that amused him. With a red-hot firebrand in his hand, he was killing, one by one, the little insects that crawled upon the ground.

I looked past him into the thickets, and at once I could have sworn that I observed a pair of eyes in which the firelight was reflected--eyes that steadily regarded me. Now, I might have believed these eyes to be those of a jaguar, were it not that they resembled the eyes of a man, and I knew for a fact that John Bannister was on the trail.

I made neither sound nor movement, but at once set out upon this new train of thought. Were a jaguar prowling around the camp, and I had seen in his eyes

the reflection of the firelight, it had been of a certainty but a few inches from the ground; for I knew well the habits and the nature of this most beautiful of beasts. But these eyes were four feet at least above the ground, and, being too large for those of a monkey, must belong to a human being--who could be none other than John Bannister himself.

Sure of my facts, I was resolved to take no action, though my life itself were in the greatest danger. I knew that I might safely leave the matter in the hands of an older, wiser, and a stronger man than I.

I saw those eyes for no longer than a few seconds, and then they disappeared. I heard no sound, not so much as the stirring of a leaf, for the night was strangely still. There was not a breath of wind.

How can I describe the emotions that then swayed me! I knew that I must possess my soul in patience, leaving what was best to do to Bannister himself. And yet I longed with all my heart to grasp the hand of my friend. I knew now, for certain, that he was near to me, watching over me, ready to strike a strong blow in my defence when the opportunity should offer. And for that reason--so great was my faith in him--I was conscious of a sense of security that I had not known for months.

I remembered that I had not seen him since that day when I beheld him running across the Sussex fields, with his brown paper parcel under his arm, when Forsyth had struck me down with his whip and carried me away, to begin my series of adventures. I remembered him, too, as I had seen him, standing in the white road looking after us. And he was now quite near to me, thousands of miles away from where I had caught my last glimpse of him; for it is a long march, in very truth, from the South Downs of England to the shadow of the Andes; and much lies between that is strange and wonderful and savage--the great ocean, the mystery of those broad and endless rivers, and the forest with its eternal twilight and dark, silent places where death lies in wait. John Bannister had gone forth to find me; and he had found me, at last, after all these dreadful days.

How was it possible for me to sleep? I lay awake for hours with quickly beating heart, and thought of all that had been and all that might be yet to come. I saw Vasco take the watch from Trust, and then Mr. Forsyth post himself as sentry towards the early hours of morning. And when at length the daylight came, Forsyth looked at me and saw that I was awake. We sat for a while, looking straight into one another's eyes.

"Friend Hannibal," said he.

But I made no answer. At which he thought--for he was a strange man in many ways--to test me with the classics.

"'*Tutum silentii praemium*,'" said he; "or, as we have it, 'Silence is ever golden.' However, I believe that you could tell us much, were you so disposed."

Still I never answered. He could think what he liked; I was determined to hold my peace. For all that, I was considerably disconcerted; for he continued to look at me for a long time in a very searching manner, the while the daylight grew and the woods became flooded with that faint, evanescent twilight that fades and seems to drift, even when the sun is at its height.

At last he gave a start, and sat bolt upright, rubbing both his eyes.

"A strange thing!" said he, and continued to look at me, but this time with a frown.

"A strange thing, indeed!" he repeated.

There was another pause, during which I had not the courage to look him in the face. I had some presentiment of what was now to come; in spite of which the suddenness with which he had made it manifest that my secret was out, quite took away my breath.

"Allow me," said he, "to offer you my most hearty congratulations. We have every reason to presume that Master Richard Treadgold is unloved by the gods."

And at that, he held out a hand, and I was obliged to shake with him, though I felt at once frightened and a fool.

CHAPTER XXII--MR. FORSYTH AND I BECOME BETTER ACQUAINTED

Forsyth got to his feet, and to my horror, immediately awakened Amos. Then was I certain that my last hour was at hand. I never thought for a moment that protection would come to me from a quarter whence I had no reason to expect it.

I had always suspected Amos to be a kind of madman; and that grey morning in the woods I was, for the first time, convinced of it. He behaved like no sane man, but cursed and raved and stamped upon the ground, upon which at last he flung himself writhing as if in pain.

He had been both foiled and fooled, and recognised it, too. Months before, he had left me in the woods to die, and now beheld me as alive as ever, and still standing betwixt him and the goal that he would gain. Twice, it appeared, had he lost possession of the map--or that part of it which was of the greatest value to him--and on both occasions it was through me that he had failed. Besides that, he had taken me for a ghost, an apparition; he had fallen down upon his knees before me; and had I had the heart in cold blood to plunge my sword into the half naked and defenceless body of a living man, Amos Baverstock would now have been as dead as the Spanish warrior himself.

Make no mistake in thinking that he felt a shade of gratitude for that. It was bitter disappointment and blind, livid fury that mastered what sanity was his. He rolled in his wrath here and there about the ground, biting the withered leaves and the dead sticks, like the mad dog he was.

Then he got to his feet and swore that he would kill me, and this time there would be no muddling in connection with a matter so inordinately simple. For this dreadful purpose he took into his hands a long hunting-knife, and with this he came toward me. And as he did so, I looked over his shoulder, and saw in the midst of the thickets the gleaming barrel of a rifle.

I knew then for certain that I was not to die, and smiled into the evil face of Amos. John Bannister himself was near at hand, my guardian and my friend. Had Amos taken another step, or raised his hand to strike, I know he would have dropped stone-dead upon the spot; for Bannister, at such a moment, would have counted his own life as nothing. But now I come to the strangest part of all my story: it was Mr. Gilbert Forsyth who intervened.

"You cannot do this," he drawled.

He had stepped between us. Without violence, almost politely, with an arm extended, he pushed Amos aside.

"Why not?" gasped Baverstock, gaping at the other.

"Mainly, my good friend," answered Forsyth, "because it will profit you nothing. But there are other reasons. In the first place, last night he might have killed you, and did no such thing. Secondly, I am already disposed to admire this youth, and to think that it would have been the better for us had he been upon our side from the beginning. Thirdly, to kill him as you propose would be a foul and dirty business, such as I refuse to countenance."

Amos turned upon him like a wild beast.

"You!" he cried. "Who are you to dictate terms to me? Who brought you here?"

"I brought myself," said Forsyth, very calmly, "and I brought you and Trust as well; for money makes the world go round, and without my worthy banker you were still kicking your heels in England. So the less you speak of that the better."

I never saw a man more self-possessed; and, on the other hand, I never saw one more livid with rage than Amos. On the instant, forgetting me, he turned the full current of his wrath upon Mr. Forsyth.

It would be irksome to repeat, word for word, the altercation that took place between them; for they fought with words and argued for many hours that morning. And whilst this was happening, now and again I shot a glance toward the thickets, where I had seen the barrel of the rifle I was sure belonged to Bannister. But I saw no further sign of him, and heard no sound. I did not know, therefore, whether he was still at hand; for as yet I had no experience of his great skill as a woodsman. I did not know that, in spite of his bulk, he could move in the undergrowth as silently as a snake, and when he struck, he did so with the suddenness with which the jaguar springs upon his prey.

For nearly all that morning Forsyth and Amos wrangled, the one to save me, and the other to do murder--the one, quiet and calm; the other, raving mad.

It was a question, I suppose, of will-power only; and Forsyth conquered in the end. Amos, I could see, was utterly exhausted. The fire within him had consumed the better part of his vitality and the violence of his nature. He was at last reduced to utter speechlessness. He stood before us, panting, his shallow chest heaving greatly like a man who has run a race. He could not stand steadily upon his feet, but swayed about, from one side to the other. I observed, also, a strange difference in his eyes. They were no longer glistening and pig-like; they were just the wild, staring eyes of a lunatic. And, sure enough, a lunatic he was.

He seated himself upon the trunk of a fallen tree, and there he sat for many minutes, shivering as if from cold. At last he turned and spoke in a weak voice--quite unlike his own--to Joshua Trust.

"Get me water, you dog," he ordered, "and be quick about it."

Trust went to a stream that was not far away; and even as the man entered the thickets, I thought that I heard something move beneath the trees, a little to his right.

He came back with the water, and Amos drained it at a gulp.

"I would know this," said Trust, standing before them both with folded arms. "Who's master now? Who takes the bridge? Whose orders am I expected to obey?"

"That's a matter for yourself to settle," answered Mr. Forsyth. "Here we are, in the midst of this almighty wilderness; and if we don't hold together, as like as not we die. For myself, I am not one who, once he has decided on a certain course of action, is easily turned aside. I have come this distance to behold the Greater Treasure, and I do not go back again until my quest is ended."

At that, Amos brightened up in a manner truly wonderful. The very thought of gold was to him a kind of tonic. He got again upon his feet.

"Why, there you speak some sense!" he cried. "I am the last man in the world to go back upon my friends. But we can do nothing without the map."

"Leave that to me," said Forsyth; "and, sooner or later, I will find it. A little subtlety and sense may very well succeed where cold-blooded murder must have failed."

And thereupon Forsyth turned to me and, taking me by both shoulders, held me at arm's length.

"Dick Hannibal," said he--for he had a singular sense of humour, quite his own--"I would have you, as you love me, and are greatly in my debt, tell us the whole truth; for I am convinced in my mind that you know all there is to know."

I shook my head. I was resolved to be as stubborn as before. And besides, I had every reason now to think that John Bannister was hovering on the outskirts of the camp, and might at any moment hasten to my aid.

Forsyth waited for some minutes. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

"I see," said he, "that neither threats nor violence will be of much avail. You may think differently, however, when I prove to you that I am neither such a fool, nor yet so soft of heart, as you appear to think me.

"We find you in the Tomb," he went on, in his slow, deliberate voice, "where we believe the map to have been hidden. You knew, therefore, that it was there; and, therefore, also, you have fallen in with Rushby. Very well, then, we all go back to Rushby; and what is more, we start without delay. We know where we left him, and we know that he cannot escape. The question, so far as I can see, presents no difficulty at all."

He appeared so confident that I was considerably alarmed, and not without some reason, for I knew that I had left William Rushby in possession of the map. Yet, Forsyth himself could never have known this. He had, however, some definite plan at the back of his mind, and appeared so cock-sure of himself that I wished more than ever that I had some one with whom I might take counsel.

I had no chance that day to attempt to satisfy my curiosity; for, so soon as we had eaten a meal, we packed up what little equipment Amos had brought with him from the ravine, and set forward on our march towards the west. I calculated that it would not take us more than two days to reach the other side of the Wood; for we followed the trail by which Amos and the others had come, and it was seldom necessary for him, who led the little column, to make use of either axe or bill-hook.

On the first night, I had the privilege of being enlightened by Mr. Forsyth, who now appeared to have taken me to some extent into his heart--though upon that long march across the Great Forest, when we had travelled in one another's company for many months, he had never deigned to speak to me on more than one or two occasions.

Amos, on the other hand, gave me as wide a berth as possible, and sat regarding me with scowls which--to tell the truth--I could not fail to see I shared with Mr. Forsyth. Indeed, I trusted Baverstock so little that, when sheer fatigue compelled me to fall asleep, I did so in the firm conviction that the man might plunge a knife into my heart at any moment. He was sullen and morose, addressing himself only to Trust and the Spaniard, Vasco, and then never without an oath, and in the voice of one who gives orders to a dog.

But the case was very different with Mr. Forsyth, whose demeanour was scrupulously polite.

"I would delight to hear your story from the first," he said to me; "for I cannot believe that you have arrived so far as this without some very exceptional adventures."

"I did not know," said I, "that my affairs meant anything to you."

"On the contrary, you interest me vastly," he replied. "Consider, had it not been for my humble self, you had now been lying with your throat cut beside the open grave--or, perhaps, we might have buried you, with some pretence of decent feelings."

And so I told him as much as I thought it would do him no harm to hear--of how I had been found by the wild men of the woods, and had journeyed by myself to Cahazaxa's Temple. Thence, I told him, I had found my way to the Wood of the Red Fish, where I had had the good fortune to fall in with William Rushby. But I told him nothing of Atupo, the Peruvian priest, or of the map which I myself had found by so singular a chance, or of the Treasure that my living eyes had looked upon.

"And this is all your story?" he asked.

I thought it best not to answer him; but I saw by the sly, half-amused expression upon his face that he knew well enough that I would keep him half in the dark.

He said nothing for a long time. And then quite suddenly, he slapped a hand upon a knee.

"Upon my life and soul," he cried, "you are a lad of spirit, such as I myself once was, until I learned that in this world it is best to assume a pose! Let me explain to you. There are certain commodities upon the earth that all men are ever after, and money is the first of these. We are, therefore, all enemies of one another; we scramble in the same gutter--to such heights has civilisation attained. Be set down for a fool, a lazy rascal and a fop, and it is easy enough to take by surprise those who think they have the whip-hand of you. You have had an example of this yourself in your own brief experience of Gilbert Forsyth. When you made off from John Bannister's cabin, on the morning when you saw us first, you never suspected that I was the one who would catch you. And so now. It is I who will

outwit you, where friend Amos, with his knife and oaths, has failed already."

I pricked my ears at that; for my curiosity was roused.

"And where are we going?" I asked.

"To William Rushby," he answered, "sometime boatswain of the *Mary Greenfield*."

"And why?" I asked.

He laughed outright.

"You must learn to see things," he observed, "from the point of view of others. Remember that I am well aware of this: Rushby and you, when you met, compared notes and hatched a plot together. John Bannister himself may, or may not, have been a party to your mild conspiracy. That is a point that does not affect the issue. I am not so sure Rushby spoke the truth when he told us he had hidden the map in the Spaniard's Tomb; otherwise, I cannot see why we did not find it. I go back to Rushby, and I take you with me, to learn the real truth."

"How will you do that?" I asked.

I thought, at first, that he had ignored the question; for he answered in a round-about way.

"There is a game of cards called Poker," he observed, "at which I myself am tolerably proficient. In this game--with which you are too young to be well acquainted--there is a method of gaining by what is known as Bluff. Amos played the game of Bluff on Bannister, and failed. He tried it again on Rushby, and was singularly successful. In other words, Baverstock pretended that he held you in his power, and he was never asked to show his cards. To bluff, therefore is a risky business, which should be practised only in moments of emergency or urgent need. I go now to William Rushby, to lay my hand upon the table, knowing for a certainty that I hold the best card in the pack."

"I quite fail to understand you," said I, shaking my head; for all this was so much double Dutch to me.

"You," said Forsyth, "are the best card in the pack. There is no occasion for us to bluff. We have you in our power, as we have also Rushby. Between you, you know the truth. If one will not speak, the other will. If neither speaks, Amos can have his way, and both of you can leave your bones in this savage country, where you have ventured of your own free will."

I saw now there was nothing about the matter so subtle as I had thought. After all, it was no more than the old game they had played from the beginning.

"I see," said I, quite slowly.

"I am glad of that," said Forsyth.

Whereupon he lay down upon his side, and almost immediately fell sound asleep.

And for a long time I watched him slumbering, and wondered greatly upon

the strange complexity of the man's character. He was polished and refined, and something of a scholar, too, if there was real learning behind his tags of Latin. He was also not without humanity and a sense of justice; else I had now been dead for a whole day and night--and that I was still alive I was profoundly grateful. And still, he was a villain, as cold-blooded as Amos himself, and more dangerous in the sense that he was saner.

These were the thoughts that carried me far into the night. Trust was again on sentry; and as I watched the man, I observed that he was nodding by the fire. Plainly, he was three parts asleep. Were my hands not bound behind my back, it would be a simple matter to escape. And as this thought came into my head--lo and behold!--*I was free*!

Someone had approached quite silently from behind me, from the direction of the thickets. In a trice, a sharp knife had cut my bonds. And--as I have stated--I was free.

CHAPTER XXIII--HOW AMOS GAINED POSSESSION OF THE MAP

The thing was done so swiftly that I had no time even to look round. I sat regarding the burly figure of Joshua Trust, very definitely outlined before the red glow of the fire; and I know that the man never suspected for a moment what had happened.

Someone whispered in my ear:

"Keep an eye on Trust. Draw back into the thickets as silently as you can. There you will find me waiting for you."

I had no need to look at him. I knew the voice of John Bannister, even though he did no more than whisper. I was resolved to carry out his instructions to the word.

Bannister withdrew. I neither heard nor saw him go, but I felt instinctively that he was no longer at my back.

I sat watching Joshua Trust, and saw that the man's chin had dropped upon his chest. It was plain to see that, though he tried his best to keep awake, he was so sleepy that he could not do so. But, knowing that there would be trouble of a certainty if Amos caught him sleeping on his post, he might awaken with a start at any moment, and for that reason I thought that I had best take the chance that offered.

I had been sitting upright, and still kept my hands behind my back, though they were no longer bound together. Moving my attitude as little as possible, I drew myself backwards, inch by inch. By this cautious method it took me the better part of three minutes to gain the margin of the undergrowth--a distance of ten yards at the very most. There I was suddenly lifted off my feet, carried a short distance and released, to grasp my old friend by the hand.

And so he had found me at last, though it seemed to me for all the world as if it was I who had discovered him. He had fulfilled the oath he had sworn to my mother many months before; and from this moment we were never again to be parted throughout our great adventure.

His story I had learned from William Rushby; but Bannister as yet knew nothing of what had happened to me, since he had not seen me from the day when I was kidnapped upon the Littlehampton road. But there was no time then to talk to one another. With as small delay as possible, we must get well beyond the reach of Amos and his friends.

That night we journeyed in one another's company for several hours through the darkness of the woods. We could not see where we were going, for it was not possible to see a hand before one's face, and we were scratched most painfully and often upon the thorn-trees that were plentiful amid the underwoods. But this was of no great account, if our own safety were ensured; for, sooner or later, Joshua must see that I was gone, and would at once give the alarm; and if we were not well out of the way by then, it was quite possible that we might be overtaken, and our plight would be as bad as ever.

So we hurried blindly on our way, until at last John Bannister deemed that we were safe. Then it was that I learned for the first time how utterly exhausted he was. He had had no sleep, he told me, for two nights, and he was still weak from the fever which had robbed him of more than half his strength.

"Let us sleep, Dick," said he. "To-morrow there will be time enough for you to tell me all I want to know."

And thereupon we lay down to sleep together, side by side, in the dense wood in which I had wandered for so long alone; and, strange as it may seem, we slept hand in hand.

I experienced a sense of security and peace such as I had never known, it seemed to me, for years. He and I were at last together; and on the morrow

he must hear all my story, just as I myself had once been wont to listen to his wondrous tales of enterprise and daring. I know that I was happy, and I also know the reason: I had often dreamed--as boys will let their fancy run away with them--that he and I were sojourning together in some savage place, beset by many dangers. And I always knew that, if he were with me, there would be naught to fear; we would come forth unscathed from every peril that threatened life or limb.

In all conscience, we had enough of danger now, on every side of us, in the darkness of the Wood. And yet I slept, contented and at peace.

Daylight awoke us, for we were both creatures of the Wild. Marking the position of the sun, we set forward towards the west, hoping to gain that night the ravine where we had left William Rushby.

Bannister told me that he feared for Rushby's life, since he was sure that Amos and the others would return to the ravine with all possible speed, so soon as ever they discovered that I had escaped from their clutches. I thought by now that I had a fair knowledge of the topography of the Wood; but I soon found that Bannister knew as much, or even more, than I. In the night we must have fled towards the south; for we had not gone far upon the route that we had chosen before we came upon the Brook of Scarlet Pebbles.

"I know where we are," cried Bannister, at once. "We are about five miles to the south of the Big Fish itself. I can tell that by the size of the stones in the stream. We had better change our course towards the south."

"But that will take us away from the ravine," said I, "which lies due west of the Wood, some distance to the north of the Spaniard's Tomb!"

"You're right, there," said Bannister. "It may be a long way round; but the longest way is often the quickest, Dick. In a few hours we should be clear of the Wood, although too far to the south. But we shall have open country before us, and should march four miles an hour."

I had, by now, told Bannister my story of all that had happened to me since I first fell into the hands of Amos Baverstock. He asked few questions, though these were always to the point; and when I had told him everything, he said nothing, but just placed one of his great hands upon my shoulder, and patted me so affectionately that the action conveyed far more to me than any words he might have used. I knew that he cared for me more than he dared trust himself to say, and, moreover, he approved of all that I had done.

So we journeyed towards the north-west, and came, full early in the afternoon, to open country. Before us we could see the rocky spurs and ridges--which were, in fact, the beginning of the foothills of the Andes--running northward for several miles, to end quite suddenly at the morass.

John Bannister had changed greatly since the days when I knew him first. He looked as big and strong as ever, but had become pitifully thin; and I thought

his hair was greyer, and there were deeper lines upon his forehead. His mouth I could not see, for he had grown a great beard, more than touched with grey. And this beard, merged into his long moustache, was spread like the beard of a paladin upon his chest.

We directed our way northward in a bee-line, so far as we could judge, towards the ravine where we had left William Rushby; and this compelled us to clamber over the rocky hillocks and to cross the gullies and declivities that intervened. It was hard work, and the sun was baking hot. And yet Bannister would not halt, even for food, for we both knew well enough that the boatswain's life was in the greatest danger.

"If Baverstock gets there before us," said he, "not only will he gain possession of the map, and thereby learn the secret of the Treasure, but there is very little doubt that he will put Rushby to death."

"I think so, too," said I. "He has been baulked so often that he will not care to take further risks. However, I now believe the man to be quite mad. Last evening I saw him look for a long time at Forsyth, and I swear there was murder in his eye."

"No such criminals are wholly sane," said Bannister. "Amos has done murder more than once, and he will never hesitate to do it again, if he thinks that he sees profit in the business. Rushby is defenceless. His wound has become septic, though I have dressed it often with what skill I have. There is a chance that the evil may spread; and in that case nothing can save his life but amputation of the leg. And that, of course, we have neither the means of doing, nor the skill to do it if we had."

We were silent for a long time after that, though we hastened our footsteps, knowing that life and death were in the scales.

I was soon utterly fatigued, and could not fail to see that Bannister as well was well-nigh at the end of all his strength. For all that, we would not give in; for William Rushby was an honest man, to whom we both owed much, and we were determined, if we could, to save his life.

Presently, we began to doubt whether we would reach the ravine before nightfall; for the sun, as we could see, was descending rapidly towards the crest-line of the Andes. Once only did Bannister pause, and then he stood stock-still upon a hill-top, shading his eyes with the palm of a hand and looking towards the west.

"Was ever anything more wonderful!" said he. "I can never look upon a mountain without thinking of Coleridge's *Hymn before Sunrise*: 'Earth with her thousand voices, praises God.'"

He stood for a while like a man in a dream; and I, also shading my eyes, followed the direction of his gaze, and saw again the great and glorious moun-

tains in the distance, like a rugged battlement, scarred and crumbled throughout æons of old Time, rising thousands of feet before the red sky of evening. And I, too, though I knew naught of the poet, felt within me a sense of great awe and reverence for the most mighty works of God.

I would have lingered there, I cannot say how long, had not Bannister taken me by a hand and led me forcibly away with such long strides that I was obliged to run. He looked straight in front of him as he walked. I could see that he was preoccupied with his thoughts, and I did not care to interrupt them. Looking about me, I thought I recognised the country. I was certain we could not be far from the ravine.

And a little after, on a sudden, we heard a shot, fired but a little distance to the front of us, towards the right.

Without a word we both began to run, and came, unexpectedly, upon the very head of the ravine.

The sun was now behind us; and we could see clearly all there was to see. Far down the ravine was the solitary tree to which Bannister had been bound when Amos had threatened him with death. And a few yards from this, near where the old camping-ground had been, were the figures of three men hastening in our direction; and these we recognised at once as Forsyth, Trust, and Amos Baverstock himself. Vasco we saw a little after come forth from the shadows of the Wood, so laden with cooking utensils and the like that he might have been a pack-mule, for he was doubled almost in half.

However, we took little notice of him; for our eyes were fixed upon the pathetic figure of poor Rushby, who was limping in great agony as he tried to run. It was clear from the first that he had little chance of escaping. It was inevitable that he must be overtaken almost at once. Suddenly he pitched forward upon his face, and lay quite still upon the ground; and, since no shot had been fired, we guessed that he had fainted from pain and exhaustion. Amos pounced upon him as a cat springs upon a mouse.

I was, of course, unarmed, for I had left my blow-pipe by the Tomb. But Bannister, who carried his rifle, hesitated to shoot, for a very natural reason: at that range, if he fired at Amos, as like as not he might hit William Rushby. So, together, we set forward running, hoping that even yet we might not be too late to save the boatswain's life.

Amos was on his hands and knees by the side of Rushby; and as we approached he sprang to his feet, waving something in his hand.

"He has got the map!" cried Bannister, who at once brought his rifle to his shoulder and fired straight at Amos.

The singing of the bullet must have made Baverstock realise that he was not by any means as safe as he would like. For the man cast no more than a glance in

our direction, and then turned upon his heel, to set off running down the ravine as fast as his legs could carry him.

Trust followed his example; and Vasco, the Spaniard, turned at once back into the Wood. I saw that Forsyth hesitated for a moment; and then, knowing full well that his strength was as nothing when compared to that of Bannister, he also turned and fled.

Bannister fired two more shots; but, as he was out of breath from running, neither of these had any effect upon Amos, at whom they were directed, save that they were near enough to make him run the faster.

Our first care, at any rate, was for William Rushby, who--as we guessed--had fainted from his great efforts to escape. He regained consciousness as soon as ever his face was bathed with water; and then, sitting up, he looked at us and groaned.

"He has taken it?" he asked.

Bannister tugged at his beard and shot a glance towards the Wood.

"Yes," said he. "At last Amos has the map. By to-morrow evening he will have found the Big Fish. After all these years he will be able to feast his eyes upon the Greater Treasure of the Incas."

CHAPTER XXIV--HOW AMOS WAS POSSESSED OF SEVEN DEVILS

I felt, at that moment, so despondent that I was disposed to burst into tears, to cry like a child through utter disappointment. For a minute we discussed the matter between ourselves, and tried in vain to see one ray of daylight. Look at it as we might, from every aspect, the situation seemed just about as bad as it could be.

Bannister himself was too exhausted to continue the pursuit, and Rushby was a wounded man, whom, in any case, we dared not again leave alone in the ravine.

"What is to be done?" I asked. And there was something so woeful in my expression that Bannister smiled.

"We must make the best of a bad business, Dick," said he. "After all, Rushby's life is of more account than the Treasure. Clearly, it is not safe for us to remain here in open country. We must return to the Wood, and find a place where we can hide. A few hours' rest, and I shall have strength enough to go on; but I am not disposed to leave my comrade until his life is out of danger."

As he spoke, he placed a hand upon Rushby's shoulder; and I saw by the look in the boatswain's face that he thought no less of John Bannister than I.

"You'll not wait for me, sir," the boatswain answered. "I want nothing better than to see Amos run to earth; for I have not forgotten the voyage of the *Mary Greenfield*, when mainly through him I was cast into irons. Besides, it's my fault that he has now got the map, and I'll never cease to blame myself for that."

"Forget it all!" said Bannister. "And as for future plans, they can wait till we are rested. The sooner we are out of this place the better; for we know not what Baverstock may do."

Then and there we gathered together what little baggage we possessed, as well as everything that Amos had left behind him when he had hurried from the camp. There were two rifles between us--and we wanted no more, since Rushby was a casualty; but we could find only ten rounds of ammunition, and I was without my blow-pipe.

I loaded myself with the rifles and equipment, whereas Bannister picked up Rushby in his arms and carried him into the Wood. There we had not long to search before we found a good hiding-place, a little hollow in the midst of the thickets, where, Bannister told us, a jaguar had reared her cubs. There was a stream near by, that connected, beyond doubt, with the Brook of Scarlet Pebbles, and we were therefore well supplied with water.

Almost at once the three of us fell fast asleep. For myself, I had never been so fatigued; and yet I awoke at daybreak, and immediately, without disturbing my companions, went forth in search of food, and did not return until I had as many wild fruits and berries as I could conveniently carry in Bannister's haversack. I then made a fire; and whilst I was thus employed the other two awakened.

Bannister's first office was to attend to the boatswain's wound. This he washed and dressed--very skilfully, I thought--and then ordered Rushby to lie quite still and to make no attempt to move.

Whilst we were eating we talked of what was best to do; and in this argument the boatswain took a leading part. He had a mind of his own, and was determined, from the first, to have his way.

He told us that he was well enough where he was, if we left him food to eat and a pannikin of water within reach, so that there would be no need for him

to move. As for John Bannister and me, we must take the two rifles and what ammunition there was, and set forward without delay towards the Big Fish, to find Baverstock and his three companions.

"Though the odds are two to one against you," he added, "that will make no difference. Stalk him, as you would a wild beast, and put a bullet through the scoundrel, as he comes up from the vault. This evening he will be there or thereabouts. Our one consolation is that he has no means of taking the Treasure away. But you must be quick, sir; for I'm open to a wager that Baverstock goes back across the plain, to find forest Indians to work for him under the whip, that he may carry all this gold to one of the rivers, and thence down-stream in more than one canoe."

There was little question that William Rushby had got the hang of the affair. Indeed, all that he predicted was, or might have been, the truth. It was not so much, I think, because Bannister wished to thwart his ancient enemy, as because he desired to see for himself how the whole business would end, that we set forward into the Wood at about midday, our destination being the Red Fish itself.

Bannister told me that you could not reach the Treasure from the northern side, because the brook there opened out into a swamp, where you could sink to the neck in mud, to be eaten alive by leeches. It was therefore necessary for us to journey by a circuitous route towards the west, until we came upon the Brook of Scarlet Pebbles, somewhere to the south of the tunnel that led to the Fish. However, we had the sun to guide us, and both Bannister and I were well acquainted with the Wood.

And now, for once, I must tell my story from a point of view other than my own, and follow, for a few hours, the fortunes of Amos Baverstock. Afterwards, I was destined to behold with my own eyes the raving lunacy of that unhappy man, and to witness the spectacle of a tragedy, at once gruesome and fantastic. But first, I tell the story as I heard it from the lips of Mr. Forsyth; and very weird it is.

With the map in his possession, Amos set forth without delay to feast his eyes upon the Treasure. Though his three companions were overcome by fatigue, and there was but half an hour that evening before sunset, the hunchback would not halt until darkness compelled him to do so; and that night the excited and disordered condition of his mind would not allow him to sleep.

He had them up in the small hours that they might be ready to start at daybreak; and they struck the Brook of Scarlet Pebbles early that morning, but a few miles to the north of the Big Fish.

Forsyth afterwards told us that all that day Amos never spoke, but forged ahead with the map in his hand, the others following as best they could. The man was now blinded by his own greed and avarice. He seemed alike incapable of

fatigue and insensible to physical pain; for he rushed forward with such mad impetuosity that he was cut to pieces on the thorns, and was soon bleeding profusely from a score of places.

He came, on a sudden, upon the swamp, into which he plunged so recklessly that he was waist-deep before he knew it. Then, to his great alarm, he found that he was unable to move. He was held tight in the mud, and was at once attacked by scores of little leeches.

He threw up his arms into the air like a drowning man, crying out piteously for help. Forsyth, as cool as ever--as I can well imagine--at once cut down a long bamboo, and held this out to Amos, who was eventually hauled back to safety, though covered from head to foot in mud.

The leeches they were obliged to cut away from him with knives; and all the time the man reviled them for not making greater haste, telling them repeatedly that they were but a short distance from the Treasure, upon which he was determined to set eyes that very day.

It was then that his companions, for the first time, suspected that the man's mind was disordered; for Amos talked like a lunatic, and there was a strange look in his eyes. For instance, he whipped round upon Forsyth and told him that he had ever been a stumbling-block, with his refined manners and his London airs, since the expedition started from Caracas. At which Forsyth laughed aloud.

"Your memory is something short," said he. "Less than five minutes ago I saved your life. You were sinking even as I pulled you out. Had it not been for me, you would have been drowned in black, stinking mud, and your corpse devoured by leeches."

At that, Amos burst into the wild and hideous laughter of a madman.

"Liar!" he shrieked. "You saved the map! It was not me you saved; it was the map--and without risk to yourself. Much good may it do you! I shall see to it that you profit nothing. Trust Amos Baverstock for that!"

And then he laughed again, and again called Forsyth "Liar!"

At the time they thought little or nothing of all this, the high talk of an excited man. They believed him to be in one of his fits of uncontrollable anger, when he could never rightly be held responsible for either his actions or his words. But they left him as he was, sticky with the black mud, with many horrid little leeches still glued upon his skin, that was already all blood-stained from the thorns. And they made a circuit of the swamp towards the east, and came suddenly upon the open place where the Red Fish stood forth from the ground, with opened mouth, as if in the act of leaping from the water.

They had no need to cast about them, as I had done, in order to find the entrance to the vault; for I had left traces as plain as any printed book to read, and the flowers and ferns that I had planted were not yet so well established that they

looked quite natural.

Amos rushed in like a mad dog, and in feverish haste fell to working with his knife, scattering broadcast the soft, rich soil that lay between the rocks. In this task he was assisted by the others--for now they were all near as wild with excitement as Amos himself. In a little time they had the slab laid bare; then they threw it backwards, so that they beheld the stone steps leading downward to the vault.

They had no need to make a torch, as I had done, since they had always carried with them a small collapsible lantern, and with this in one hand and the map in the other, Amos led the way down the steps, through the ante-chamber where the floor was paved with ingots, and thence into the great vault below.

And, thereupon, there is little doubt that Amos Baverstock went wholly mad. He rushed here and there, yelling like a fiend. He snatched up the gold in handfuls--the drinking vessels, the rings and bracelets and the ingots--and cast them, in a kind of frenzy, right and left, all the time shouting and dancing and filling that great chamber with the echoes of his laughter.

Then he filled his arms with ingots, and tied these together with a rifle-sling, so that they resembled a great golden faggot, and weighed far more than any normal man could carry. For the time being, he knew not what he did; but was possessed of seven devils that were brothers, and more like to one another than in general brothers are; and their names were Avarice, Violence, Jealousy, Cruelty, Revenge, Cowardice, and Cunning. Forsyth and the others regarded him amazed.

Amos dashed up the stairway, carrying his great load upon his crooked back. When he reached the open air, he threw his bundle down upon the ground, and then turned an ear to listen at the stairhead.

He heard Forsyth, Trust, and Vasco ascending in pursuit of him; and then again he burst into his madman's laughter, and, laying hold of the slab, hurled it back into its place, and rolled a great boulder upon the top of it; for his strength was not his own, but that of all the seven devils that were brothers who possessed him.

"Lie there and rot!" he shouted. And they below heard his footsteps as he danced upon the stone.

[image]

"'LIE THERE AND ROT!' HE SHOUTED. AND THEY BELOW HEARD HIS FOOTSTEPS AS HE DANCED UPON THE STONE."

They cried out to him to be merciful and to release them; but he only laughed the more, telling them that he was going alone across the plain to find Indian porters to carry the Treasure through the wilderness, and that he would not return for months--by which time they three would be dead--dead as Orellano's soldier--starved to death in the very midst of the gold they had endured so much to gain.

And then Amos Baverstock set forward, laughing loudly, with his heavy burden on his back, and a heavier burden still upon his soul. He went alone into the woods, whilst the daylight faded and the shadows flooded the undergrowth; and his loud, mad laughter scared the monkeys and the birds amid the tree-tops; even the jaguar slunk away in fear at the sound of that unholy mirth. The very Wild was filled with terror--all save the great and stealthy snake that lay coiled in silence in the cool woodland pool, more evil even than Amos, more strong than all his seven devils, more cruel than Death itself.

CHAPTER XXV--HOW THE SHEEP WERE SHORN

In the meantime, John Bannister and I journeyed together through the Wood, and came in a few hours to the Brook of Scarlet Pebbles. This we crossed, and took up our westerly route, in order to avoid the swamp of which we knew. This was a far longer march than that accomplished by Amos; and that night we camped in the jungle--so far as we could tell--a mile or two to the west of the Red Fish.

Early the following morning we continued on our way, and soon struck the Brook, as chance had it, at the pool of the electric eels, into which we waded without a moment's hesitation. We found the tunnel without difficulty, and through this advanced stealthily towards the open place where we knew the Red Fish to be. We took good care to make as little noise as possible; for we expected to find Amos and his friends encamped above the vault. And then Bannister ordered me to remain behind, whilst he went forward to get what news he could.

I should say that half an hour elapsed before he returned; and that was an anxious time for me. Expecting every moment to hear a rifle-shot, I waited, knee-deep in water, in the impenetrable darkness of the tunnel. So dark was it, indeed,

that I never knew that Bannister had returned, until I heard his voice quite close to me.

He told me what he had seen. There was little doubt that the vault had been visited since my departure, several days before; but there was one circumstance which he could not by any means explain.

"A great boulder has been rolled upon the slab," said he, "as if to weigh it down. It looks as if Amos meant to keep the Treasure safe."

"I know nothing of that," said I.

"Then, you had best come with me," said Bannister. "The road's clear enough, though something extraordinary has happened."

We came forth together from the tunnel, and I was at once half-blinded by the sudden daylight, just as I had been before, when I first beheld the red rock standing forth from the ground in the very semblance of a fish with opened mouth. But when I could use my eyes again, I saw that everything in that strange place was just as I had left it, with the exception that the stone slab was no longer covered with earth, and a great boulder, round as a snowball, lay upon the top of it.

"Who placed this here?" I asked; and that was more than Bannister could answer.

We went together to the slab, and there he lay down and listened, with his ear upon the stone.

"I can hear nothing," said he. "It will be safe enough to enter."

At this we removed the boulder, lifted the slab, and went down the stone steps into the Treasure-chamber below.

It was quite dark, for we had neither torch nor lantern. We had made certain that the place would be deserted, and it therefore came to us something in the nature of a shock, when we beard a jingling sound--as if some one, who had been asleep upon the gold, had sprung on a sudden to his feet. And then a human voice cried out to us; and this was so loud and unexpected that I confess I jumped as if I had been pricked with the point of a knife. For all that, I recognised the voice at once as that of Joshua Trust.

"You've come back!" he cried. "Stand clear of me, or else I'll wring your neck! Who's he who swore that he never yet went back upon his friends?"

There followed a pause, during which I tried my best to make head and tail of what the man had said. It speaks much for John Bannister's intelligence that he tumbled to the truth at once. To my bewilderment, he answered in a voice that was like enough to that of Amos Baverstock.

"I've come back all right," said he. "But I'm here to offer terms, which you may accept or not, as you wish."

And thereupon, for some reason or other, the Spaniard, Vasco, burst forth

into such a rapid stream of language that it seemed to me--who understood not a word of what he said--that he swore with the most amazing fluency and violence. At all events, when at last he ended, apparently for want of breath, it came as a kind of relief to us to hear the lazy drawl of Mr. Forsyth.

"*Amicus certus in re incerta*," he observed. "Sure friend in doubtful circumstances. Amos, we welcome you. We greet you as Joseph received his brethren."

It was then that Bannister spoke in his natural voice; and, as I listened, I tried to imagine the feelings of those others whom his words took so wholly by surprise.

"Amos Baverstock has not returned," said he; "and I am prepared to take my oath he never will. A certain friend, in very truth, was he who led you here, and then entrapped you that you all might starve to death!"

"Who's that?" cried Trust.

"My name's John Bannister. And it was you, Joshua Trust, who once tried to kill me--who, indeed, left me for dead. Do you remember that day in the mountains, when Amos caught me in Cahazaxa's Tomb? Well, now he has done the same for you. He has buried you alive; and when he comes back for the gold he covets, he will think to find it strewn with the bones of those who were fools enough to believe he was their friend."

I heard Trust groan in the darkness; or, I think, perhaps, a growl describes it better. Forsyth, judging by the tones of his voice, was just as calm as ever.

"Bannister!" he exclaimed. "So this is the end of it all! We are to owe our lives to you!"

"That's a matter," answered Bannister, "for yourselves to settle. How long have you been here?"

"Not many hours," said Forsyth; "but it seems like days and nights. We have had time enough in which to consider the misery of our end--without water, food, or light, in the midst of all this gold."

Bannister was silent a moment. He had not descended the stairs into the chamber, but stood upon a step about midway down with myself close behind him.

"I'll have no treachery," said he. "It is very needful that you understand the situation as it is. I am a man of my word, as you may or may not know, and I set you free on certain conditions only."

"Fire ahead," said Forsyth. "State your terms. Anything for daylight and for freedom--for the certain knowledge that we have been granted a new lease of life."

"Good!" said Bannister. "I go before you up the staircase, and wait for you above. Whatever arms you have you leave behind you. If any one of you comes forth with a rifle in his possession, I shoot him dead upon the spot."

"We share the gold with you?" asked Joshua Trust.

"Not an ounce of it, you fool!" cried Bannister. "Years ago I might have had it for myself, had I wished to play the robber. All this treasure is not yours or mine or anyone's; it belongs by right to the Government of the country. I am neither a smuggler nor a thief. Were it worth less, I might not be so honest; but here are millions, such as to release would be to let loose a great force of evil that would profit no one, and ourselves least of all. Here this gold has lain for ages, and here let it lie. That is one of my conditions."

"Let us out!" cried Trust. "All night I have dreamed that I must eat bars of gold to live. I have sucked golden ingots with parched, dry lips. I have slept upon gold, and never before had I a couch so uninviting. Let us out, I say! I agree to anything."

At that, Bannister bade me ascend the stairs, and followed close upon my heels. When we reached the top, we waited both with our rifles at the ready, prepared to fire upon the first sign of trouble. But the three of them, one behind the other, came forth out of the vault as meek as shorn lambs--first Trust; then Vasco; and finally, Mr. Gilbert Forsyth, who, swaggering into the daylight in no particular haste, had the audacity to hold out a hand to Bannister, as if he greeted an old acquaintance.

John Bannister, however, did no more than shrug his shoulders, and then went to the stone slab and threw it back into its place.

"When did Amos leave here?" he asked, turning again to Forsyth.

"Last night."

"Did he say anything before he went?"

"Yes, he was so gracious as to tell us we could die where he had left us. As for himself, he was going back into the forest to find native porters to carry the gold away."

"Just as we thought!" said Bannister. "Rushby was in the right."

And, thereupon, our attention was immediately attracted by the strange conduct of Joshua Trust, who looked up at the little patch of blue sky just visible between the overhanging branches of the trees, clenched both his fists in an amazing burst of passion, and shook them above his head.

"He shall pay for this!" he cried, with an oath that can never be repeated. "And I have served him faithfully for years! He has gone back upon me, when he saw that he had gained everything he wanted! By thunder, he shall pay for it!"

Bannister looked at him, and smiled.

"Have more sense, man," said he. "What use is all this anger? Amos Baverstock is mad."

"Mad or sane," cried Trust, "he shall answer for what he has done. Come, tell me, what's the time?"

"I should think no more than ten," said Bannister. "We started at daybreak,

and we were not two hours upon the march before we found the brook."

When I looked at Joshua, I was reminded of the man whom I had known on board the *Mary Greenfield*, who was wont to sit drinking at his cards. He was red of eye and flushed of countenance, and I saw that his lips trembled with a passion he was quite unable to contain. He was a rough man, in any case; and now that he had lived for months in the wilderness, and had been saved from death as it were at the eleventh hour, he was the greatest savage of the five of us.

"Ten o'clock," he repeated. "Four bells, by Christopher! Then, he can't be far away. He can never have travelled far by night, for he took with him a hundred-weight of gold. I'll go after him," he cried. "He shall answer yet for what he tried to do."

Bannister stretched out an arm to detain the man; but Trust sprang aside and, with another oath, dived into the thickets.

CHAPTER XXVI--A NIGHT OF TERROR

I was about to follow in pursuit of Trust, and had even taken a few steps towards the undergrowth upon the right bank of the brook, when Bannister called me back.

"What's the use?" said he. "Let dogs delight. We have our own friends to think of."

"Our own friends?" said I.

"Have you forgotten Rushby? We have left him alone too long as it is. His life is more to us than the fate of either Trust or Baverstock; and he is in danger just as great."

At those words, I felt something of shame that I had indeed forgotten one who had proved himself so loyal and true a comrade.

"Then, what's to be done?" I asked.

"That's not so easy to decide," said Bannister. "I take it," he added, turning again to Forsyth, "that you are now willing to cast in your lot with us, to give up all thought of plunder?"

Forsyth actually yawned.

"Have it your own way," said he. "I have made a promise which I will faithfully keep. I have always believed that there was honour among thieves; but, even here, I find I was mistaken. To speak the truth, I am heartily sick of the whole business, which has cost me a pretty penny with nothing to show for it, save a scratched skin and a score of bruises, and the loss of an ear. You may count me as one of yourselves. I have little enough, perhaps, upon which to flatter myself, but if there is skill in gaining, there is at least an art in losing. It can be done gracefully. Do you not agree?"

"Moralise as much as you like," laughed Bannister. "It amounts to no more than this: you have failed dismally, and are glad enough to find yourself alive. You are wise to accept the situation as it is. That's all the same to me. Henceforward, you are under my orders, and I expect prompt obedience."

"I shall be charmed," said Forsyth, with a mock bow. "And what of Rushby?"

"He lies some way to the north," said Bannister. "I am alarmed at his condition. The wound in his leg is septic, and it is very doubtful whether he will recover."

"I am distressed to hear it," answered the other, to whose effrontery there seemed no end; for he added, "If the truth be told, it was I myself who shot him--with the best intentions in the world."

"No doubt," said Bannister grimly. "There has been give and take on both sides; and I am the more glad to have saved your life, since I know for a fact that you stood between Dick, here, and certain death, when Amos would have killed him. But we waste time in useless talk. Before we leave this place, I propose to cover the slab with earth, to hide all traces of an intrusion so utterly worthless, doomed to failure from the start."

And thereupon the four of us set to work, scraping the soft earth back upon the stone slab; for Bannister, who had enough of Spanish to express his meaning, soon found another ally in Vasco, who, after all, was a weak, shiftless kind of fellow, with few opinions of his own. Though the man had been bewildered by the sight of so much gold, the Treasure had had much the same effect on him as on myself when I first went down into that vast, amazing chamber. He was frightened of it all; and as well as that, he now realised for the first time that he had served for all these months one who was both treacherous and mad; and had it not been for Bannister and me, he would not have escaped with life.

We were all hard at work upon our hands and knees, when we were surprised by the sound of a rifle-shot, fired at no great distance in the Wood, in a northerly direction.

Bannister got slowly to his feet, and stood listening; and then, although he turned in my direction, it was as if he spoke quietly to himself.

"One shot," said he. "And one shot only."

That was all he said.

"Trust was never armed," said I.

"That signifies nothing," answered Bannister. "Amos is loaded down by gold. If he carried a rifle, Trust may have wrenched it from his hands."

We waited for some minutes, expecting to hear another shot, or perhaps some other sound. But the whole Wood was silent--the silence of midday, when the sun is at its height and all the wilderness is resting, the wild things seeking refuge from the fierce rays of the tropic sun.

"Come," said Bannister, "we had best see to this."

He led the way into the undergrowth, and we followed him in single file. The trail of Amos was broad as a road, for, in his madness, he had rushed forward, breaking down all obstacles that stood in his path by the sheer weight of the gold he carried and the impetuous, headlong nature of his flight.

There could be little doubt that Joshua Trust had followed him with as little difficulty as we. Certain it was that they could not be far ahead, since Trust himself had not yet been absent half an hour. In all probability, the night before, Amos himself, overtaken by the darkness, had fallen sound asleep, and, being exhausted by his frenzied efforts, had slumbered on until long after daybreak.

In any case, we had not journeyed far before we came upon the still, huddled form of him who had once been known as Joshua Trust, who now lay a corpse, in a pool of his own blood, upon the trail that he had followed.

John Bannister kneeled down upon the ground beside the body, but presently got sharply to his feet.

"Stone-dead," said he, and nodded sagely, as if to signify that hither in the end go all things weak and mortal.

"Shot?" I asked.

"By Amos. Through the heart."

We stood in silence around the body, and I know that I was thinking that it would be no more than common decency to bury this poor, misguided man where he had fallen, when there came to my ears a sound that made my very blood run cold.

It was a sound of laughter, faint and far away. Never in my wildest nightmares had I heard laughter to compare to that. It was the laughter of a fiend, terrible to listen to, for there was something in it of the chuckling of an old, demented man, the cry of a new-born child, and the senseless mirth of one who is delirious.

In that half-light we looked at one another. There was cold fear in the eyes of us all, even in the eyes of John Bannister, who I did not know had fear of anything that lived upon the earth.

"Amos!" he exclaimed. But his voice was no more than a whisper.

I saw that Forsyth shuddered. And then that man, as a rule so calm and nonchalant, who had always seemed to me to dread nothing so much as that he might show his feelings, burst forth in the hottest indignation. I shall never forget that moment, for it was the only occasion upon which I saw John Bannister afraid, and Mr. Forsyth alive--a living, sentient being--in every fibre of his body.

"This madman must not live!" he shouted.

Bannister answered slowly, in the same quiet voice in which he had spoken before.

"I am inclined to think you right," said he. "His very existence upon the face of the earth is a blot upon Creation. The sound of that hideous laughter robs the wilderness of all its beauty."

"Then, after him!" cried Forsyth.

"Leave that to me," said Bannister.

He opened his rifle, and slipped a cartridge into the breech. I heard the click of the lock, and I saw how tightly his right hand gripped the small of the butt. And I knew that death was still in the pot, that we were not yet at the end of all this strife and horrid bloodshed.

We went forward in pursuit, Bannister leading, hot upon the trail, the other three of us following at his heels.

All that afternoon we journeyed in a direction north-eastward, so far as we could judge. And from time to time we heard the shrill, savage laughter of that maniac, but a little way before us. And each time we heard it, we were filled with dread--the dread that comes naturally to one who finds himself confronted by the supernatural--the same dread that is believed to make the human hair to stand on end in the presence of a ghost.

For Amos Baverstock, body, mind, and soul, was still in the possession of his seven raging devils; and it was as if these evil spirits infested the humid, stifling atmosphere of the very jungle through which we passed in hot pursuit. Hitherto, we had been adventurers in a savage land; we had walked in the midst of dangers that were material and real. But now, with that unearthly laughter for ever in our ears, we felt that we were wayfarers in the dark nether regions, that not only our lives, but our very souls as well, were in peril of perdition, of everlasting death. The fleeting shadows of the Wood were to us the twilight of the Underworld. We were opposed by forces stronger and more evil than wild beasts and wicked men.

Darkness caught us before we had overtaken the madman whom we chased. How he had managed to elude us for so long is little short of a miracle; for he was weighed down by the gold he carried on his back. There were times when he was quite near to us, when we could distinctly hear him breaking his way through the thickets, rushing blindly onward. And at such times he was silent--ominously

silent. But he would always, quite suddenly, shoot ahead again--how, we could not tell--and presently, we would hear his wild laughter as before, far away from us--laughter in which there was something of triumphant glee, as well as lunacy and senseless mirth, incomprehensible and terrible to hear.

All that night, during which we rested twice--on each occasion for an hour or more--we heard his laughter in the Wood, throughout the length and breadth of which it was as if fear of the man had spread. I verily believe the monkeys sat shivering above us in the tree-tops, and the great beasts of prey, who were wont to hunt by night, crouched with flattened ears like frightened cats in the dark places of the jungle.

Speaking for myself, I know that I experienced a most novel and insecure sensation. I felt that the constant sound of this demoniacal laughter would in the end drive me also mad; and Vasco, I am certain, felt the same, though I cannot speak for the others.

For all that, I had never seen an expression of such invincible determination as the daylight disclosed upon the face of Bannister. His jaw was set: his lips tight pressed, and there was a look in his eyes as hard as steel.

He said not a word to any one of us; and we had no thought of food, though we all four drank deeply of water at the first stream to which we came.

Then we went on, following the trail, with the sound of that maniac's laughter to guide us like the siren of a ship in a fog at sea.

Never was a journey more strange, more ghostly. We were haunted men, though we found upon the road evidence of the material. For, here and there, lay golden ingots that had fallen from his arms, and there was blood, too, upon the dead leaves upon the ground, where he had torn his flesh upon the thorns.

And then, at last, we sighted him, in a place where the undergrowth was sparse and the trees a little way apart. For no longer than an instant did we see him, else John Bannister had shot him dead; for it was a mad dog we hunted, and it was not right that he should live. Strange as it may seem--since they had sojourned for so many months in one another's company--it was Mr. Gilbert Forsyth who was most keen upon the chase. He was like a bloodhound on the trail. It was as much as Bannister could do to keep him back.

"Have at him!" he cried. "There he is! Shoot, man! Shoot him down!"

But--as I have said--we caught no more than a glimpse of him. That glimpse, however, was enough. If it had been terrible to hear his laughter, it was even more terrible to behold him with our eyes. Every shred of clothing had been torn from his back. He was plastered with black mud from the swamp in which he had waded; and this mud--though we could not see that--was still alive with little leeches that were draining the life's blood in his veins. His hair was all ragged and dirty; and without clothes he was more hideous than ever. We could see the

ingots, tied in a great bundle upon his back; and we marvelled that any human being could carry so great a load. He shot a look at us before he dived again into the undergrowth; and in that look there was that for which we could not fail to pity him, vile and evil though the man had been all the days of his life.

His eyes were bright as ever, yet seemed to have grown larger, and, at the same time, to have sunk deep into his head. His mouth, which was never straight, was twisted to a degree that was alarming. He had always the thinnest of lips, which he kept as a rule pressed tight together; but now his mouth was opened wide, and he was slobbering. As for his eyebrows, they reminded me of Satan himself as I have seen him pictured, for they met upon the bridge of his nose, to slant upward, arrow-shaped.

John Bannister dashed forward. I saw that he meant to make a supreme effort to overtake the man. We all wanted it to end, for the whole affair was ghastly; and yet we dreaded the end, just as a hangman must have no liking for his duty. And ours--we thought--was the very hangman's work.

It so happened that in this place the Wood was dense. Amos did not laugh again, but we could hear him just in front of us; though, strive as we might, we could not overtake him, until the pursuit had lasted, perhaps, another twenty minutes--for, in such a case as this, it is impossible to keep account of time.

Bannister, who was still leading, of a sudden caught his foot in the root of a tree, and pitched forward on his face. Without pausing an instant, Forsyth rushed past him; and I, knowing that Forsyth was unarmed, and fearing that he might come to the same violent end as Joshua Trust, hastened after him, without looking to see if Bannister were hurt.

Almost at once I caught sight of Amos, but dared not fire at him, because Forsyth was in front of me. And then, suddenly and unaccountably, to my amazement Amos stopped, and looked back at us with a face hideously contorted.

I carried my rifle to my shoulder, and I believe I would have pressed the trigger, had I not then seen what it was that had brought the fugitive to a standstill. He had broken his way headlong through the thickets, and now found himself upon the bank of a wide, dark pool, and we were so close upon his heels that he had no time to turn either to the right or to the left.

It is my great regret that I did not fire; but I may be excused, inasmuch as I did not at once recognise the place, and had then not the least suspicion of what was about to happen. No sooner was my rifle to my shoulder than Amos turned away from me, and, without a sound, with his great load of gold upon his back, plunged straight into the pool.

He sank so low at first that we thought he must be well beyond his depth; but, almost at once, his feet found something firm--I think the fallen trunk of a tree buried beneath the water. He rose to his full height with the water no higher

than his knees, and began to stumble onward, when the whole of this uncanny business reached its tragic and terrible conclusion.

I saw something move upon the surface of the water--something that shot across the pool in utter silence and with the rapidity of an arrow. Right round Amos it swerved, and passed so close to us--who stood gaping on the bank--that we could not fail to recognise what this horror was. It was the flat and evil head of a gigantic, loathsome serpent.

Then the truth burst upon me like a sudden rush of ice, and I realised that Amos Baverstock was come to that place which I myself had named the Glade of Silent Death.

CHAPTER XXVII--HOW AMOS MET HIS END

We stood horror-stricken upon the bank of that dark pool--mute, impotent spectators of a tragedy we were powerless to prevent.

Vasco, the Spaniard, stood beside me; and I heard his teeth chattering in his head like castanets. As for Forsyth, before that gruesome spectacle was ended he turned away with a kind of sickening sob, at the same time passing a hand across his eyes, by which I knew that the man was human after all. Bannister--who had soon caught us up--said nothing, but stood rigid at the back of us, his rifle in his hands, ready to fire so soon as an opportunity should offer. As for myself, it was as if I was transfixed in petrified amazement. I was hypnotised by the terror of the thing I saw, and could not look away, but must watch the tragic business to the last.

With a great splash of water, the immense body of the snake arose from out the middle of the pool, the surface of which forthwith became agitated by scores of little waves, forming a series of concentric circles, spreading outward to the bank.

We saw the glistening coils of the terrific reptile wind themselves, swiftly and yet stealthily, around the frail body of the doomed, unhappy Amos. He let out a piercing shriek, far more terrifying to hear than the uncanny laughter with

which he had disturbed the silence of the woods--it was freezing in its shrillness. And at the same time he threw both his arms above his head, so that his heavy bundle of golden ingots fell into the water and at once disappeared from view.

He made--so far as we could see--no effort of resistance. Terror, it seemed, had mastered every muscle, nerve, and sinew in his body. He was paralysed by fear. We could see, in that dim, religious light, the huge head of the snake swaying backward and forward in front of him, whilst its long forked tongue darted swiftly in and out. We saw the man's face, too, livid with fright, and his wide, staring eyes. For a moment all his features worked spasmodically. I think he tried to cry out once more; but the breath had already been driven from his slender frame by the colossal strength of the relentless serpent that, even as we looked, broke down the slender bulwark of his ribs.

It was then that John Bannister fired. He told me afterwards that he meant to put Baverstock out of the torture he was suffering both of body and of mind. If that were so, it was a lucky shot; for it killed at once the reptile and the man.

The bullet drilled the anaconda, breaking its spine, and thence pierced the heart of Amos Baverstock. The unhappy wretch vanished from sight upon the instant beneath the water of the pool; but the dying struggles of that gigantic snake were amazing to behold.

It lashed right and left, twisting all ways, writhing like a worm; so that we, who looked on, were drenched in flying water. It made the most frantic efforts to drag itself from the pool. The lower part of its body seemed to be paralysed and quite useless; but at last it succeeded in half twining itself around the trunk of a tree, where its head swayed from side to side quite aimlessly. What surprised--and I think horrified--us most of all was the silence of the brute.

I fired, and missed; for my hand trembled violently. And, thereby, it was left to Bannister to end the work he had begun. With his second shot he smashed in the reptile's head; and the great snake at last lay motionless, as loathsome in death as it had been terrible in life. I am ready to believe that five minutes elapsed before any one of us spake or even moved.

"I shall never cease to dream of this," said Forsyth, in a weak voice, at last. "No such nightmare ever was!"

I saw that he wiped a hand across his forehead; and I did the same. Though I was splashed all over with the water from the pool, a great sweat had broken out upon me, and I experienced, in quick succession, alternate sensations of extreme heat and cold.

Vasco seized Bannister by an arm.

"We go away!" he cried, in broken English. "We go now! It is no good stay here."

The man turned back into the Wood as if he would retreat by the way we

had come; but Bannister called him back.

"Not that way," said he, in Spanish. "It is but a little way from here to the end of the Wood, and we can pass round to the north across open country. I know a way to the south of the morass."

We were under Bannister's orders. And thankful we were that we had such a man to follow. We knew there was an urgent need to go back to Rushby as quickly as we might.

We were obliged to pass round the pool, and this brought us to within a few yards of the great body of the snake.

"I never knew," said Bannister, "that such a monster could exist. He must be over thirty feet in length. But, come; we can do nothing here."

In single file, as before, we followed him, and presently came forth into the open air upon the skirting of the Wood.

There we regarded one another in shocked surprise; for the faces of us all were white, and Vasco was still trembling. We said nothing; not a word passed between us; but we all breathed deeply, like men who had been for a long time under water.

I looked up at the blue sky and the hills in the distance, to the east, whence I had first looked down upon the Wood of the Red Fish, after my journey across the plain. And I remembered what I had then thought; how I was filled with the restless spirit of adventure; how the joy of life was strong within me, whilst I ran the danger of my life, all naked as I was, with my Indian blow-pipe in my hand and my quiver full of arrows. But now I had seen the very face of death. I had beheld a living terror. The mask of Romance had been removed from the forbidding face of Tragedy. And that Wood was now to me a dread, unholy place, wherein, I knew, I would never dare to venture again, in spite of the great Treasure that lay hidden in its midst.

"I would not go back," I cried to Bannister, "for all the Treasure of the Incas, for all the treasure in the world!"

My old friend looked at me, and smiled.

"You are right," he answered. "And there never will be a need to, Dick. As soon as we are rested, we must find our honest Rushby, and do what we can for him."

We camped that night in the open air, a mile or so to the south of the morass; and the following morning continued our journey, keeping the Wood to our left.

We had not gone far before we discovered the figure of a man, who came running towards us from the direction of the hills. I noticed that he advanced with a peculiar limp, and on this account, for the moment, I believed it to be Rushby, most marvellously recovered of his wound.

But when the runner had drawn quite near to us, I was surprised beyond

measure to recognise my old friend, Atupo, the Peruvian priest, whom I had befriended in the vault beneath the Temple of Cahazaxa.

Though I called him by his name, he cast never so much as a glance at me or any of the others, save Bannister, at whose feet he threw himself, as pagans prostrate themselves before the idols that they worship.

"My master!" he exclaimed, and went on, in his quaint, broken English, in some such strain as this: "I never thought to live to set eyes on you again."

Bannister lifted him to his feet and, laying a hand affectionately upon his shoulder, asked him what news he had of his friends and brethren, who had fled from their dwellings before the wrath of Amos.

Atupo told him that the majority had sought refuge in the woods, where many of their number had been treacherously murdered by the wild men. He himself, however, had founded a small colony of some score of persons who were living by the side of the ravine that crossed the plain, not so far beyond the hills that we could see. All these, he said, were anxious to return to Cahazaxa's Temple, but dared not do so, believing Amos to be still abroad.

Bannister at once set the man's mind at rest, assuring him that it was not only safe for them to return, but that Amos himself was dead and the Greater Treasure undisturbed.

At that, Atupo threw up his hands by way of a gesture of delight; and then, looking about him, for the first time recognised both Mr. Forsyth and myself. And it is doubtful which of the two of us he was most surprised to see.

Myself he regarded as a trusted friend; but he knew that Forsyth had been one of Baverstock's party, and he was astounded to behold that gentleman alive. Being told by Bannister that he had naught to fear, he pointed straight at Forsyth.

"But that man should be dead!" he cried. "With my own eyes I saw him shot with an arrow, the point of which was steeped in deadly poison."

And then it was that Mr. Gilbert Forsyth told us the truth, which I have set down already: how, with a fortitude that one cannot but admire, he had burned the poison from his flesh, and thus saved his life, though he had fallen into a fever.

Atupo, soon afterwards, expressed himself anxious to return to his own friends; but Bannister was one whose custom it was to look well ahead, and he knew that the ancient Peruvians had been well skilled in medicine.

"Friend Atupo," said he, "we have need of your assistance; for there is one of our number who is sorely wounded. You and your comrades owe not a little to us; and I will, therefore, ask you to go back to the Temple, and there await our coming. Prepare such drugs as you may have for a man who has a wound in the leg that will not heal."

"Does the sun ask the moon to shine?" inquired the Peruvian. "What of the white man's medicines?"

Bannister threw out his hands.

"Alas!" he exclaimed. "We have none; we have used all we had."

And so the matter was settled; Atupo, the priest, returning to the Temple, and ourselves veering round to the west, between the Wood and the morass, towards the place where we had left William Rushby.

CHAPTER XXVIII--CONCLUSION

Early that afternoon we arrived at our destination, and found that we were none too soon. For Rushby had long since consumed all the water we had left him, but had managed somehow to move himself, though in the greatest pain, to the bank of the stream that flowed near at hand, where he was able, from time to time, to fill his pannikin with water. Also, that very morning, he had eaten the last of the food that we had left him. So it was well we came no later.

He told us that he had slept daily for many hours; and on one occasion he had awakened quite suddenly, to find one of those small deer that were numerous in the Wood staring at him with its soft, mild eyes, from a distance of not more than ten yards.

I asked him if he had not been afraid that some wild beast of prey might find him in the night. But he told me that he had never bothered himself about such matters, since both by day and night he had kept a fire alight. He had heard the report of the first shot, that which had brought about the death of Joshua Trust, though he had heard nothing of the other shots, upon the far side of the Wood, fired in the glade where Amos Baverstock had met his tragic end.

"I have lain here for days," said he, "wondering what was happening, and whether I would ever set eyes upon any one of you again."

When we told him the story of the death of Amos, he seemed little enough impressed; for he was a rough-and-ready seaman, without the gift of imagination, and he had not been there himself to behold with his own eyes the terror of that incident or to hear the wild laughter of the fugitive as he fled before us through the Wood.

"A fit end for such a man," said he. "He himself was as evil as any snake, though he had courage of a sort; for I remember him well, when he faced the mutineers on board the *Mary Greenfield.* And what of the map?" he asked, turning suddenly to Bannister, who shrugged his shoulders.

"We do not know," he answered; "but in default of certain evidence we must presume that that little fragment which we brought with us all the way from Sussex went down into the water when Amos was crushed to death."

"So then," said William Rushby, who was of a practical turn of mind, "no one is any the wiser, so far as the Big Fish is concerned?"

"No one," said Bannister, "save we five, and I do not suppose that any one of us will ever care again to undertake such an expedition."

I looked at Mr. Gilbert Forsyth; for I was inclined to think that he was the only member of our party who was likely to persevere upon the quest of the Greater Treasure in spite of any promise he had made.

I was surprised at the attitude he had assumed; for there was something in it that jogged my memory, that took me back to the day when I had first seen him and Baverstock and Joshua Trust. For he lay upon his back, with his hands clasped behind his head, and one knee thrown carelessly across the other. But how different was he now! He no longer wore his highly polished boots, his double-breasted waistcoat, and his hat tilted at a jaunty angle on his head. He was in rags and tatters, burnt and blistered by the sun, deprived of an ear where the skin was all white and scarred owing to his having burnt it. And yet he yawned in the same lazy fashion.

"I've had enough of it," said he. "I want nothing better than a land of chimney-pots and gas-pipes. I shall rejoice at the sight of a policeman."

And he yawned again.

Rushby, we found, was in no better plight than before. It was quite impossible for him to walk. We saw at once that we must carry him; and as delay would profit us nothing, we set forward that very afternoon, heading in the direction of the hills towards the east.

It was a silent, almost a saddened, party that crossed the plain to Cahazaxa's Temple. We took it in turns, two at a time, to carry Rushby; and on that account we could not make many miles a day. We crossed the suspension bridge, and at last came within sight of the great ruin, whence from the hill-top we looked down upon the forest, wherein we had all risked our lives so often, in the heart of which I had lived for weeks with the wild men of the woods.

I asked Bannister how it was that they had treated me so kindly, when it was these same people who had murdered Atupo's friends.

"Curiosity," said he; for he could explain most things. "The South American savage is not by any means as curious as the African; but you must remember

that the men who found you had never before set eyes upon a white man. They probably looked upon you as a kind of god. With the Peruvians, it was different. Though the forest folk never ventured to the Temple, they had regarded the priests for years as their natural foes."

We remained for two weeks at the Temple, during which time Atupo personally attended to Rushby's wound, bathing it with a decoction made from a herb that he procured in the forest. Whatever this was it proved, at any rate, effective; for the wound soon healed, and the boatswain was at last able to walk with the aid of a stick.

We then set forward upon our journey towards the west, bidding good-bye to the quaint people whom we had already learned to love. We crossed the plain and that marvellous suspension bridge that had existed for centuries, and stands--for all I know--to this day, as evidence of the bygone civilisation of a great and ancient people. We came to the valley in which lay the Wood of the Red Fish; but we passed so far to the south that we did no more than see it dimly through the thick morning haze that lay between the hills. And after that we entered into a country very different from any we had yet seen--a land of high mountains and deep valleys, clothed with trees.

We were days upon our march across the Andes. We were obliged to progress by easy stages, because Rushby was half a cripple. There, in the highlands, we found a mild, simple people, engaged in agricultural pursuits, tending large flocks of llamas, or Peruvian sheep. From village to village we went, like beggars, and were always treated with hospitality and kindness.

At last we gained the crestline of those immortal mountains, and could see, both to the north and to the south of us, peak upon peak, rugged and inaccessible, towering like giants into the sky. Thence we descended to the narrow tableland, where the grass was knee-deep and native villages were many.

All this was a journey of several weeks, and yet, in more ways than one, something in the nature of a pleasant picnic after the hardships and the perils we had been called upon to face.

Sleeping night by night beneath the stars, wayfarers among the glorious and rugged hills, we had learned the art of comradeship. We found that there was good even in Forsyth and the sleepy, idle Vasco; and fortunate, indeed, is he who never travels in worse company than that of men like Bannister and Rushby.

And so, upon a certain day at sunset, I was strangely conscious of a feeling of sadness when I knew that we were come to the end of our adventures, and that we soon must part. We stood then on a steep bluff, and looked down upon a narrow strip of sea-board, populous with towns and hamlets, with fertile fields between; and so we came to the seashore, and saw the sun go down upon the wide and golden Pacific Ocean.

[image]

"AND SO WE CAME TO THE SHORE AND SAW THE SUN GO DOWN UPON THE WIDE AND GOLDEN PACIFIC OCEAN."

And now my story is told. Since those days I have ventured often in the wild places of the world--upon great open spaces, amid the summits of unknown mountains, in dense, steaming forests--but never again have I journeyed to the Wood of the Red Fish. Nor, to my certain knowledge, did any of the others.

In that, as in much else, we thought alike. Let the Inca gold lie in the dust, where it has lain for above four hundred years. He who will may yet go forth to find it. As for me, whenever I remember that dread Wood I see the gold, stacked and glimmering in the torch-light, and I hear the wild, mad laughter of Amos Baverstock as he fled before us, and see him once again and hear his piercing shriek, when he was caught in the silent, stealthy coils that crushed that evil man to death before our very eyes. And I ask God to have mercy on us who are yet alive, and to save us from a like living and ending.

THE END.

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